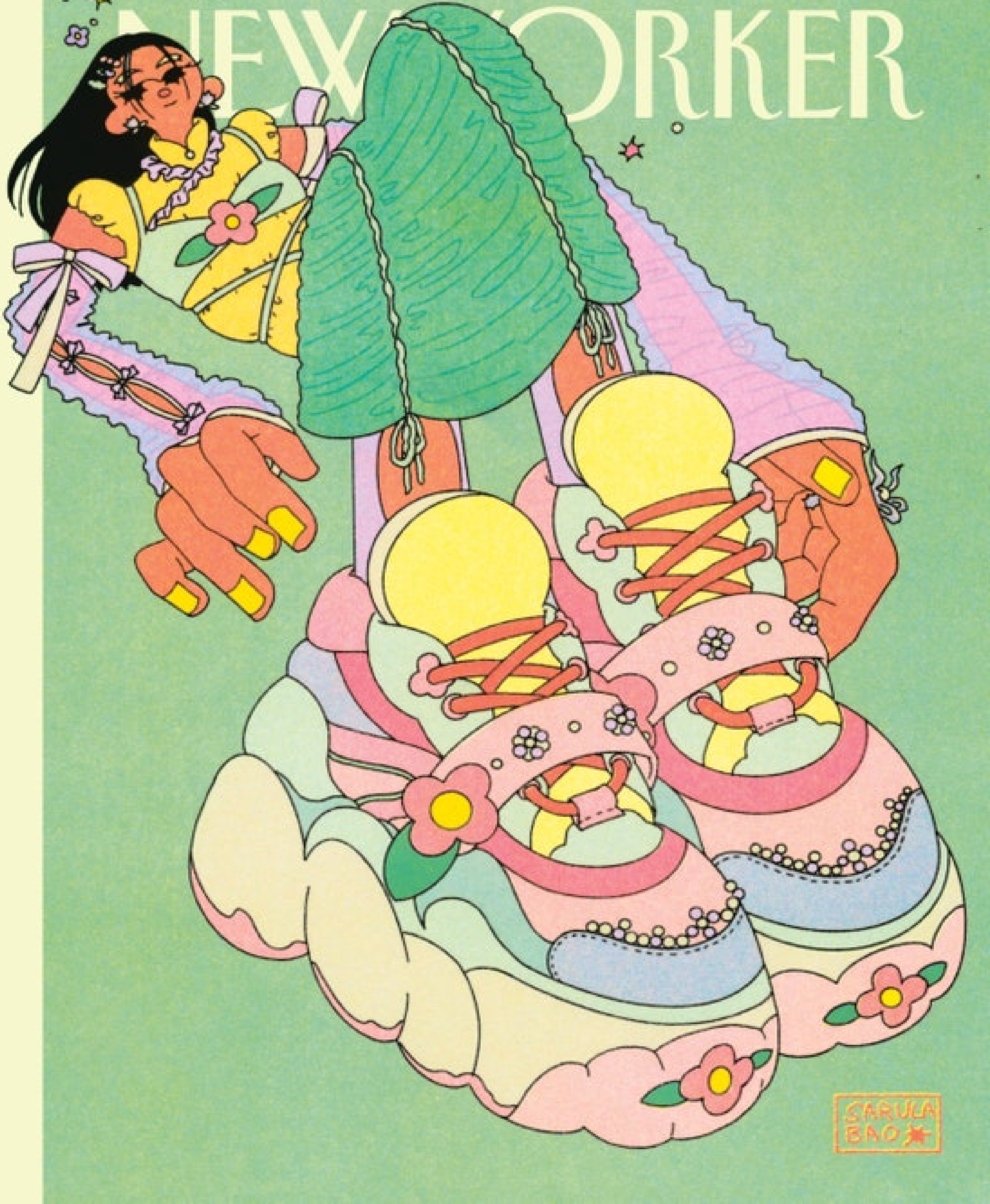
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American Chronicles

- How the Graphic Designer Milton Glaser Made America Cool Again

How the Graphic Designer Milton Glaser Made America Cool Again

From the poster that turned Bob Dylan into an icon to the logo that helped revive a flagging city, he gave sharp outlines to the spirit of an age.

By Adam Gopnik



Each age has its own kinds of heroes and heroines. Sportswriters and disk jockeys once had profiles as sharply etched as the heads on Mt. Rushmore, and everyone knew who Jimmy Cannon and Symphony Sid were. (Symphony who?) There was a time, too, when art directors and commercial illustrators were major figures, their studios and styles known by sight. In the postwar era, when George Lois made covers at *Esquire*, Alex Liberman did layouts at *Vogue*, and Alexey Brodovitch oversaw all at *Harper's Bazaar*, such figures were the great switching stations between avant-garde experiment and the commercial world. These were our impresarios of style, and honored as such.

No art director's work was more influential or instantly identifiable than that of Milton Glaser. The extent of that style, which adorned books and records and movies—and is revealed in a new anthology from Monacelli, courtesy

of Steven Heller, Mirko Ilić, and Beth Kleber, titled simply "Milton Glaser: Pop"—is astounding. Glaser was famous as the co-founder and original design director of *New York* and as a creator of two images that helped define two decades. One was the 1966 poster of Bob Dylan that showed him with snakelike hair blossoming into a skein of rainbows. The other was the 1976 "I❤ NY" logo—which was commissioned by the State of New York but promptly adopted as a local symbol of the city, and, being keyed to the city's unexpected revival, is the closest thing there has ever been to a logo that changed social history.

But Glaser's real achievement lies in what the book lays out: a breathtaking empire of imagery that encompassed both decades and more. Anyone who came of age in the sixties and seventies will be astonished to discover that so much of the look of the time was specifically the work of Milton Glaser and Push Pin Studios, which he founded with Seymour Chwast and Edward Sorel and then oversaw. (I recall standing in front of a paperback bookstore in Montreal with a few bucks in my pocket, agonizing over the choice between "Hard Times" and "Tom Jones"—both of whose enticing covers, it turns out, were made by Glaser.) The Signet Shakespeare series, posters for rock bands, album covers for newly fashionable recordings of Baroque music (Bach and Vivaldi), classic nineteenth-century novels, the outsides and insides of *New York* when it was an audacious newcomer—all of it was done in a manner that is at once immediately recognizable and resistant to easy analysis.

Glaser's was a hybrid style with an individual effect. There are very few moments in the history of design that have such firm ownership and such overarching influence at the same time. The only comparisons that come to mind are Gerrit Rietveld's red-yellow-and-blue designs for the Dutch movement De Stijl—which paralleled his friend Piet Mondrian's experiments in abstraction—and the London Underground posters produced in the nineteen-twenties under the supervision of Frank Pick, many by the American E. McKnight Kauffer, which recast London mass transit as a jaunty, well-ordered socialist utopia. Glaser's manner was so distinctive that, paradoxically, it could be widely shared: the Beatles' "Yellow Submarine" film, from 1968, is often associated with Glaser—wrongly, inasmuch as he was not directly involved; correctly, inasmuch as it was his style that

animated the animation. Exactly because that style was so eclectic, it could be almost impersonally reinvented and applied.

Glaser's passion, as his published notebooks reveal, was drawing. A Jewish New York City boy—born in 1929 in the Bronx, to Hungarian immigrants with a dry-cleaning business—he belonged to a generation that used the city's public education, and particularly its specialized high schools, as a springboard to the wilder shores of ambition. He studied art and design at the school now known as LaGuardia, of "Fame" fame, and continued his studies at Cooper Union. Like his friends and New York contemporaries Jules Feiffer and Ed Sorel, he developed a style that was virtuosic and intently accomplished, but originally fed on the Sunday funnies. Just as Feiffer built his fifties style on the template of "Terry and the Pirates," Glaser started out copying Disney comics and then inventing his own material. Though he rejected borrowed imagery for the pleasures of seeing anew, the hyperbolically *drawn* spirit of American comics—every contour asserted, serpentine and black—entered into his hand and those of his New York cohort, as surely as Gothic tracery entered into Botticelli's and those of his Renaissance peers.

In the early nineteen-fifties, Glaser got a Fulbright to go to Italy and study with the still-life painter and printmaker Giorgio Morandi. Few traces of Morandi's chalky, peasanty, muted style survive in Glaser's work, but Morandi was a more stylized artist than it might appear, and his balance of original seeing and visible making remained a constant in Glaser's approach. Objects had outlines; weight came before light. In his subsequent career—he was twenty-five when he co-founded Push Pin with his fellow Cooper Union grads—Glaser spoke and wrote volubly about his art, but, in the way of many artists, what he said tended to be unhelpfully general; he affirmed the necessity of "experiencing 'reality.' " You would never deduce the look of his output from the things he said about it. Artists, often guarded, tend to be noncommunicative about their work, often from guardedness: Cézanne's dictum to "treat nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, the cone," which for generations seemed to be prophetic of Cubism, turns out to be conventional art-school instruction, probably offered because Cézanne couldn't think of anything else to say. In Glaser's writing, apart from some understandable defensiveness about being typed as a commercial artist, he employs a slightly mystifying rhetoric of "immunity"—how we all become

inured to appearances and have to be jolted from our expectations by art. What's odd about this is that his own best work played so wittily with clichés, with "things the mind already knows"—half-forgotten historical styles from Aubrey Beardsley to Paul Colin, offering a child's garden of old illustrations, with stereotyped outlines and fixed inherited shapes and bright poster colors. Strenuously opposed to collage and to the kind of appropriation of form that made Pop art, he believed in drawing—but the sort of drawing where shapes evoke a history of seeing a thing as much as the thing itself. (He was disparaging of Andy Warhol's line when Warhol was still a successful commercial artist, and, indeed, Glaser was far more talented—though perhaps it was exactly that talent that held him back from the iconic simplicities that Warhol achieved.)

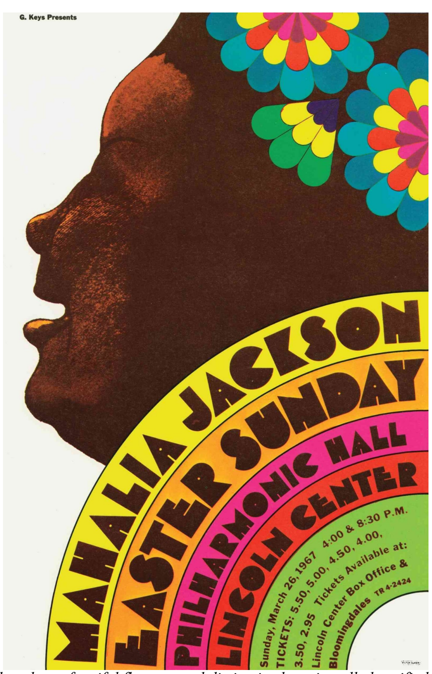
The editors of the new Glaser anthology call the Push Pin mode that bloomed in the sixties his "Pop" style, and this seems accurate. But Glaser's work was no popularization of Pop art. It was, instead, a parallel system that shared a Pop spirit—the annihilation of distinctions between high and low, a love of stylization itself, of those clear black comic-book contours, balanced with a love of abundant white space, the two together recalling the look of old circus posters and Times Square billboards. Above all, there was a contagious sense of pure delight—but one based on a foundation of European draftsmanship. His was not the drawing style of a Beaux-Arts master, to be sure, but an incised, self-announcing outline shared by Paul Klee and Saul Steinberg.

Push Pin was genuinely popular, then, in a way that Pop wasn't. Far from annihilating the distinctions between art and commerce, Pop art proper—the paintings of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol—actually reaffirmed them; you had to be an expert ironist to grasp the secret allusions and the many art-world in-jokes that propelled Lichtenstein's comic-panel paintings. Glaser, in contrast, changed the social space by taking the covers of paperback books and popular recordings so seriously that they emerged as artful rebuses. They appealed to an intelligent audience, appreciative of irony and indirection, but they were also meant to be fun.

We tend to overstate the poverty of the style that precedes a style we admire; histories of rock and roll treat what accompanied it on the airwaves of the fifties as if the music were all "Sing Along with Mitch" and "How Much Is

That Doggie in the Window?," when it was also Sinatra's concept albums, Sarah Vaughan's collaborations with George Treadwell, and Dave Brubeck's million-selling recording of a jazz instrumental in five-four time. And so we remember paperback books, pre-Push Pin, as either clinically bare, as with Modern Library editions, or outlandishly lurid, as with an edition of "Madame Bovary" featuring an Ava Gardner-style femme fatale, complete with slipping negligee. (Glaser's very first paid illustration, for *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, is in this mode, with blood dripping from a windowsill.) There was, in truth, much ambitious "art" illustration in those years, including Ben Shahn's covers for S. J. Perelman and Kauffer's cover for Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man."

Still, the line between the ad look and the art look was more neatly drawn in those earlier days. A Shahn cover was a sign saying "sophisticated." And, when Glaser began making album and book covers, it was in a style closer to the overtly "art" end of things. In 1959, he provided a sequence of illustrations to accompany a François Mauriac story in *Esquire*—those were the days!—which he did in a dark, woodcut style taken from Félix Vallotton, all haunted faces and flat black silhouettes. That was a borrowing Glaser did nothing to hide. He was always open about his sources; he had so many that apologizing for one would have been like a card sharp apologizing for an ace. The manipulation was the point.



Rainbow hues, fanciful flowers, and distinctive lettering all electrified the aesthetic.Art work © Estate of Milton Glaser / Courtesy the artist / The Monacelli Press

It was only in the sixties that Glaser came to marry the blaring-glaring palette of advertising with the simplifications and geometric ordering of the European avant-garde: a sophisticated look and a selling look became one. To this, he added a Day-Glo palette that had hardly been seen before. Day-Glo pigments, which were made in a Cleveland factory and had been employed largely for military and industrial applications, where their fluorescence seemed essential to safety and order, became a Push Pin signature—though it's unclear how much Glaser used actual Day-Glo paint and how much he merely emulated the look.

The sixties were very much Glaser's decade, and at the center of his fame sat that ubiquitous poster of Bob Dylan, made for Dylan's seminal "Greatest Hits" album, from 1967, released just two months before "Sgt. Pepper." The poster is a stunning example of how Glaser could untangle a complicated concept with a simple, bold graphic. To the left, Dylan's profile is offered in a solemn, dark silhouette; to the right, his famous Jewfro explodes in those radiant Art Nouveau rainbows and snakes. It marks the transitional moment, captured in the album, when Dylan's virtuous folk sermons ("The Times They Are A-Changin' ") ripened into his visionary imagistic anthems ("Just Like a Woman"). Piety becomes psychedelia in an image of a once well-meaning minstrel whose mind has been newly turned on and tuned in. The poster is not simply of the time. It *describes* the time, in graphic detail.

Of all the riches embedded in the Monacelli book, it may be the complete covers of the Signet Shakespeare, from around the same period as the Dylan poster, that are the most arresting. A central figure, usually enigmatically representative of the play's action, appears in half-finished form, done in a charmingly elegant, linear style that recalls both Aubrey Beardsley and white-figure Greek vases; only a small patch of the drawing is in color, while the rest spins out like suggestive smoke. "Hamlet" is an agonized youth's face, with a watching father's head springing from his own and a barely suggested woman's head—Ophelia?—alongside; "Julius Caesar," memorably, is a tilting classical figure in profile, a zigzag of blue on a white implied toga to suggest greatness and a spot of pure red nearby to imply his stabbing. If you had no idea of what a play was about, none of these covers would tell you. Glaser relies on a general knowledge of the text—Hamlet is haunted, Julius Caesar is killed—and then suggests with his cryptic images that this story is more interesting and somehow more contemporary than one

might have thought. The covers were less illustrations of the plays than they were invitations to read them.

The silhouette, the outline, and the shadow were, as the anthology's editors indicate, crucial tools in this arsenal of suggestion—visual forms quite outside the usual repertoire of Pop art, which depended on an arch literalism for its effects. The synecdoche and the implication were Glaser's rhetoric. His posters and magazine covers were often crowded, in a way that recalled the German American artist Richard Lindner, and in a way, too, that presaged the style that a team of animators brought to "Yellow Submarine." Surely, its sublime "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" passage is not so much an homage to Glaser as it is simply exemplary of Glaserism. Part of the beauty of the great designers is that the language of form they create remains widely applicable. Liberty prints all come from William Morris, even when they're designed today.

If there is a secret ingredient in Glaser's work, accenting the obvious borrowings from Art Nouveau and Art Deco and the rest, it is his debt to the art and design of Vienna circa 1900. He owes a great deal to Gustav Klimt, for his crowded campy stylizations, and to the Vienna Secession more broadly, for its marriage of minimalist simplification and dense, *horror vacui* decoration—the geometric chair and the free-flowing fabric. Glaser is very much the child of the Wiener Werkstätte, a Secession offshoot known, ironically, for provoking the more-modernist-than-thou dictum that "ornament is crime."

Glaser occupied a very specific space in the sixties. He didn't belong to the counterculture that rested on rock music, with its album covers and posters—Dylan aside, Glaser made relatively few of these, and those he did are less memorable than the overtly psychedelic ones made with less deliberation by San Francisco artists like Wes Wilson and Rick Griffin. Nor was Glaser at home in the all-mocking world that George Lois, as *Esquire's* art director, pioneered (Muhammad Ali photographed as St. Sebastian; a tiny Andy Warhol drowning in a can of tomato soup). At the same time, Glaser's own magazine work was among his most resonant achievements. His cover and page designs for *New York*, the weekly that he and Clay Felker created in 1968, continued until the magazine was seized by Rupert Murdoch, a decade later. Like Rea Irvin at this magazine, four decades earlier, Glaser had to act

as both the ringmaster and the tastemaker for a new publication. Attitude is everything in such matters, and, where Irvin had made a New Yorker in the unlikely image of a condescending Regency beau, Glaser consolidated all the pizzazz and aggressive irreverence of the Madison Avenue manner into a handful of department headings and fonts. (He also did the covers for some of Tom Wolfe's early, and best, books, Wolfe being to *New York* what E. B. White was to *The New Yorker*.)

Perhaps the single most beautiful image Glaser ever contrived was the poster for the magazine's launch. It showed the head and shoulders of the Empire State Building—then not always taken as a masterpiece of design—in various heightened states, cloud-covered or snow-covered. The concept of a single icon in many conditions was one that he had played with elsewhere, as in the four pianos he drew for the cover of a compilation of jazz pianists, each piano colored to mark the sound of one of the players. But rendering the Empire State as a pliable model was inspired. There's no more delightful affirmation of the perpetual New York dialogue between the substantial and the ephemeral, the skyscraper and the snow.

By 1975, he had broken from Push Pin and set up his own studio, Milton Glaser, Inc., in a town house on East Thirty-second Street that once served as the headquarters for *New York*. The slogan "Art is Work" was frosted onto its transom window. The flow of that work didn't slow. One of his most "selling" images was a poster, which became an album cover, for the Broadway musical "The Wiz," in 1975; a single chorine is transformed into a Hellenistic maenad, a moving force of flowing black lines. He offered a wonderful, surprisingly open and romantic portrait of a youthful-looking Beethoven in a 1980 poster for his own retrospective, as though letting out his breath after a quarter century of straitjacket-by-silhouette. He went on to amend the famous "I❤ NY" logo with a bruise, post 9/11 (and added the codicil "*more than ever*"). A decade ago, he was enlisted to do a season poster for "Mad Men"—a commission he first resisted (who wants to be the look of a bygone decade?) but finally acquiesced to, placing Don Draper on a sofa against an explosion of Glaser rainbows, and so making the point that the stereotypes of the sixties began as an individual vision.

And yet they were never *just* an individual vision. The studio model was, for Glaser, as much an artistic process as it was a business convenience. As one

looks through all the riches of the Signet Dickens and Signet Shakespeare, one has to remind oneself that Glaser, though he is the designated owner of the style, did not make these covers alone; he drew on his studio's stable of illustrators and designers. (There's a memorable photograph of the three Push Pin founders with seventeen former and current artist-employees.) Perhaps they grimace at being bigfooted by the boss as they turn the anthology's pages. But then, on the finished Signet books, even Glaser's name appears in tiny type. It was normal to work in anonymity, with the wide-whispered recognition of the in-group who knew and the diffuse appreciation of the out-group, who didn't.

Glaser's work represents, as he admitted before he died, of a stroke, in 2020, an exercise in art applied to commerce. We routinely howl against the commodification of culture, but nothing is more heartening than seeing how good books can be made into desirable objects. The spell that packaging casts is essential to its humane appeal. Our academic and intellectual culture remains puritanical in its attitude toward the persuasive surface. Book covers may be inessential to the primary task of reading books, and yet they are invaluable to the secondary task, making books appealing and seductive by their shimmer. We mock Steve Jobs and the Apple team for packaging the MacBook in that translucent white sleeve, with the careful little seal there to hold it fast. But Jobs was right to understand that ceremony and presentation are essential to a sense of meaning. Nothing, after all, is more superfluous than civilization itself.

The care and imagination put into the envelope of existence is a sign of the strength of a society's humming self-confidence. Wherever there is undue ornament, the economy is healthy. The heart pattern in the steamed milk of a latte is an assurance, like the peacock's plumage, that the bistro, or bird, is in such good shape that it can afford to waste energy on looking wonderful. Judging a book by its cover is one of the wisest judgments we can make. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

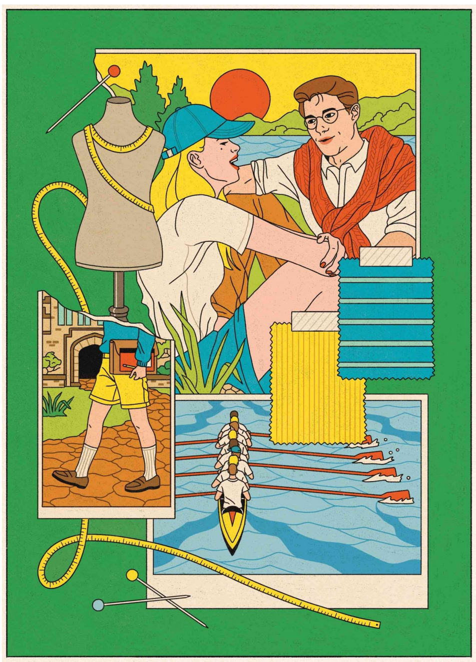
Books

- J. Crew and the Paradoxes of Prep
- Briefly Noted
- The Accursed Brilliance of Sebastian Barry

J. Crew and the Paradoxes of Prep

By mass-marketing social aspiration, the brand toed the line between exclusivity and accessibility—and established prep as America's visual vernacular.

By [Hua Hsu]



Duck boots, barn coats, and turtleneck sweaters seemed deeply eccentric in the sunny, laid-back suburb of Silicon Valley where I grew up, in the eighties and nineties. These garments—among the talismanic offerings of the J. Crew catalogue that somehow appeared in the mailbox—might as well have been for wearing on Mars, and my friends and I, many of us the children of immigrants, were only dimly aware of the heritage that they were inviting us to access. (I had no idea that a person could be called a Wasp, other than the Wasp in my comic books.) But we knew that J. Crew was, enticingly, just out of our reach. And, because these clothes communicated in an insider's code, lacking the self-identifying mark of a little swoosh or a tiny guy on a horse, they seemed mysterious, too.

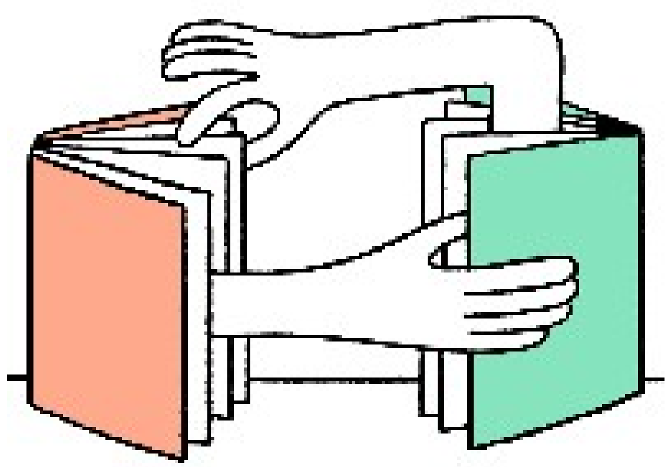
I picked out the most unusual item I could find: an unlined, plaid zip-up jacket. When it arrived, it clashed with my middle-school wardrobe, a mix of basketball sneakers, my father's old corduroys, and skate-themed T-shirts.

I didn't understand that my new jacket was something one might wear to go boating, or even that people went boating for fun. Yet I delighted in wearing it along with my normal clothes, creating a garish mishmash of stolen subcultural valor. The look was awful, and it was mine.

It was also, in part, Arthur Cinader's. When Cinader started J. Crew, as a mail-order retailer, in 1983, he was targeting shoppers who wanted something more stylish than other mail-order brands, such as L. L. Bean or Lands' End, and more affordable than Ralph Lauren. But, where traditional catalogues highlighted the product, J. Crew's emphasized scenes, tableaux, glimpses of leisurely cool. The pages featured the upper crust at play, horsing around and lounging about, untroubled yet serious. These were poses and postures to be studied and adopted, and here were the anoraks, chambray shirts, or roll-neck sweaters to wear while doing so. Soon after the first J. Crew catalogues were sent out, telephone operators struggled to keep up with all the calls. "You looked at the catalogue and thought, 'I want to live like that,' " the designer Peter Som explained.

The Best Books We Read This Week

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Within half a dozen years, the brand had become synonymous with preppy apparel, and Cinader decided to open its first brick-and-mortar shop—a potentially risky move for a business based on a meticulously conceived catalogue. But he and his colleagues enlisted catalogue data to make decisions about location. The first J. Crew store was in Manhattan's South Street Seaport, a tourist zone that also happened to be close enough to Wall Street to catch the after-work crowd. The night of the grand opening, a fire marshal was said to have shown up because of reports of overcrowding. When J. Crew expanded to Boston, Cinader and his colleagues targeted the Chestnut Hill Mall, an accessible distance to at least a dozen colleges. "We never meet a college student who doesn't know J. Crew very well," Cinader said. By the mid-nineties, J. Crew, still a family-run business, was opening stores across the country and sending out seventy million catalogues a year. More important, it was permeating culture—competitors imitated its catalogues, and, where it had once positioned itself as an affordable alternative to Ralph Lauren, upstart brands now offered themselves as down-market alternatives to J. Crew.

All of them were trying to replicate the potent yet amorphous sensibility that had captivated Cinader: prep, which the author Maggie Bullock describes as "the bedrock of straightforward, unfettered, 'American' style." Her new book, "The Kingdom of Prep: The Inside Story of the Rise and (Near) Fall of J. Crew" (HarperCollins), is a buoyant and persuasive account of how the company's fluctuating fortunes reflect Americans' shifting attitudes toward dress, shopping, and identity.

At the center of Bullock's story is the malleability of prep, which she depicts as the "leisure uniform of the establishment." What people consider to be cool changes with time, but coolness always presumes exclusivity and effortlessness. At its height, Bullock argues, J. Crew embodied the nonchalant, "broken-in cool" that typified prep. What's complicated about the mass-marketing of social aspiration, though, is that it's more about belonging to a group than about standing out as an individual. The class fantasy at the heart of prep style was the prep school, where dress codes offered a way of diminishing the differences among its students. This was a different temperature of cool from, say, the leather jacket. With the rise of prep fashion, you could dress up like members of the ruling class, even if the looks you mimicked were solely of them dressing down.

"Prep" didn't start out as an aspirational identity. The term gained wide currency with "Love Story," the 1970 blockbuster film about a working-class Radcliffe student (Ali MacGraw), who falls in love with a Harvard blue blood (Ryan O'Neal). She calls him a "preppy" to tease him, but eventually it becomes a term of affection. For many, the expression brought into focus an entire history of Northeastern prep-school privilege, a style associated with Wasp culture. In 1980, Lisa Birnbach's "The Official Preppy Handbook" was published, as a tongue-in-cheek guide to the fashions, speech patterns, and codes of high society. It was satire, but no offense was taken. As Bullock writes, "Rich kids love poking fun at their own privilege, so long as they don't lose any of it in the process." And, for those who aspired to join their ranks, the best-selling book offered a script for acting the part.

Prep fashion has its roots in the nineteenth century. In 1849, Brooks Brothers introduced the ready-to-wear suit to American consumers, radically changing how people dressed. The availability of premade garments in standardized sizes had two effects: it made "gentlemanly" dress affordable to everyday workers, and it loosened the silhouette of menswear from the fitted, custom tailoring of the Victorian era.

Bullock argues that Brooks Brothers' roots could be construed as "deeply egalitarian"—the firm sought to outfit the common worker. Yet by the early twentieth century its clothing had become identified with élite boarding schools and the Ivy League institutions that they fed. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's "This Side of Paradise," partly set at Princeton during the nineteen-tens, the undergraduate poet Tom D'Invilliers laments how dress became a competition, with his classmates keenly attentive to details like "the color of their neckties and the roll of their coats." Even during the Great Depression, Ivy League campuses were a laboratory for leisure-wear experimentation: penny loafers and bucks, varsity sweaters, banded V-neck sweaters, all assembled with the nonchalance of true Wasp privilege. "Nothing identified an outsider like a too-crisp collar or a spit-shined brogue," Bullock writes. "A man who confidently strolled into class or an office in well-scuffed bucks didn't have to worry he'd be held back by some bourgeois triviality. He knew where he stood. So did everyone else."

Soon campuses were overwhelmed by the cohorts who arrived after the Second World War. From 1945 to 1957, 2.2 million veterans, largely from blue-collar backgrounds, enrolled in college, and they needed to dress the part. Shops such as Brooks Brothers and J. Press sold respectability, even if a few of your tonier classmates were secretly judging the color of your tie. What became known as the Ivy look—full of versatile basics like T-shirts, khakis, and sports coats—was a uniform for a society that saw itself as classless, clean-cut, and optimistic. Adopting the look was a way of fitting in at a time when society seemed open to reorientation. This appeal also held for African Americans during the civil-rights era, who appropriated the sartorial styles of a culture that sought to exclude them. Bullock notes that Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Louis Farrakhan all shared a fondness for Brooks Brothers suits. The fashion critic Robin Givhan describes this style of dress as "conciliatory rather than confrontational. These were not clothes for a fight but clothes for a gentlemanly—or ladylike—negotiation."

The countercultural movements of the sixties, in turn, brought with them a celebration of the individualism that prep style, full of codes and the presumption of shared experience, has always suppressed. The personal became political, down to issues of self-presentation: the way you wore your hair or accessorized your clothes signalled a resistance to conformity. Still, even as hippies popularized beads and bare feet (a uniform of its own, inevitably), there were those who remained infatuated with the classic look of the élite. In 1965, an influential Japanese photography book, "Take Ivy," presented campus fashion of the late fifties and early sixties, or at least an imagined, prep-forward version. (Writing in the *Times* about a 2010 English-language reprint, Guy Trebay noted that it showed "essentially all the stuff you'd see in a current J. Crew catalogue.") And, in 1968, Ralph Lauren, still in his twenties, launched a full line of his menswear, Polo. Within a few years, his signature cotton Polo shirt—the one with the polo-player logo—had become a cornerstone of preppy fashion.

Perhaps because Lauren, like Cinader, was Jewish and Bronx-born, he was alert to the codes and customs that the Greenwich set took for granted. Although sometimes described as more of a stylist than a designer—he had little hands-on experience in the making of clothes—Lauren was, above all, a visionary salesman: he understood how to extract Americana out of

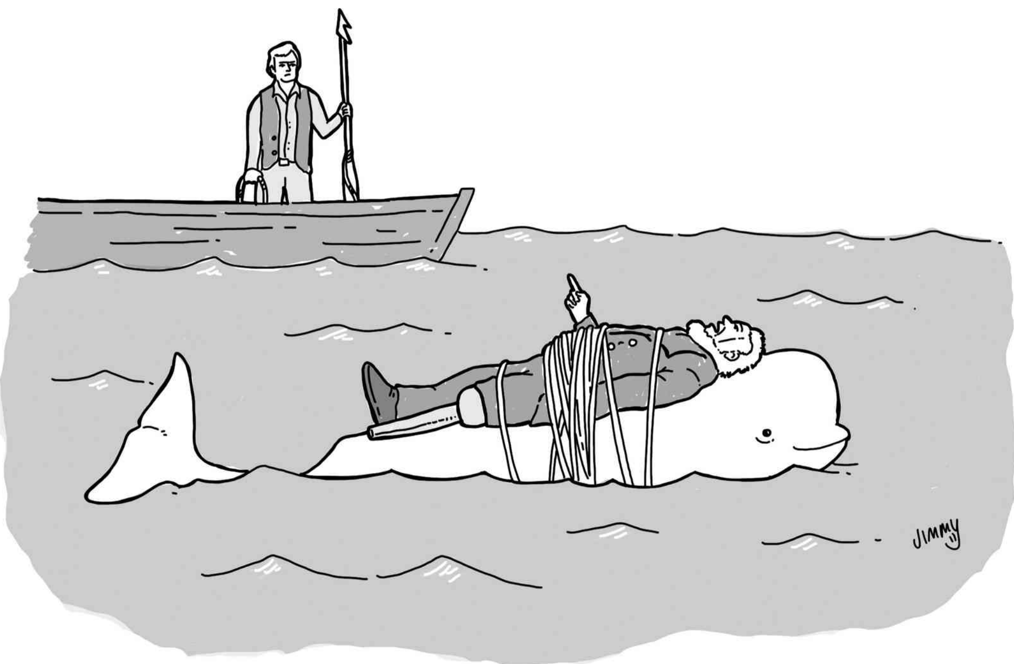
American history. His looks alluded to outdoorsmen and boarding-school culture, American frontier myths and even the Indigenous legacies displaced in the name of those myths. The story told by a Lauren jacket—maybe the one worn by Robert Redford in "The Great Gatsby," or maybe the one worn by Diane Keaton in "Annie Hall"—could dissolve all manner of historical contradictions in a dreamy nostalgia.

Arthur Cinader's dream wasn't to become the next Ralph Lauren. Although Cinader was known as a sharp dresser, he just wanted to make a mail-order catalogue, extending what had been his family's stock-in-trade since the nineteen-forties. He settled on clothes, though it could have easily been electronic equipment. (He probably spent more time leafing through *The New Criterion*—he was a longtime patron of the traditionalist journal of arts and letters—than he did perusing the fashion trades.) His first thought was to name his line for Sir Edward Coke, the seventeenth-century English jurist, but "J. Crew" proved to be more versatile and evocative. "Crew" conjured images of campus oarsmen, with connotations of upper-crust leisure. That the "J." invited associations with the Ivy League clothier J. Press didn't hurt, either.

Cinader claimed that the original J. Crew was a men's haberdasher in Princeton, and at first this fib was the only original thing about J. Crew. The company adopted existing designs from manufacturers but chose the colors and attached a J. Crew label, featuring the clothes alongside items from Sperry or Woolrich to suggest kinship with these respected old-line brands. The enterprise was based out of an unprepossessing family warehouse in Passaic, New Jersey, but it deftly sold a vision of leisurely roughhousing. "The heritage of J. Crew weekend clothes is 100 years of outfitting rugby, lacrosse and crew," the first issue of the catalogue announced. "Whence their long-wearing construction. And authoritative style." The cover showed a man and a woman each holding an oar. Cinader had been told that even successful mail-order companies started out in the red for about two and a half years; J. Crew had broken even within eighteen months.

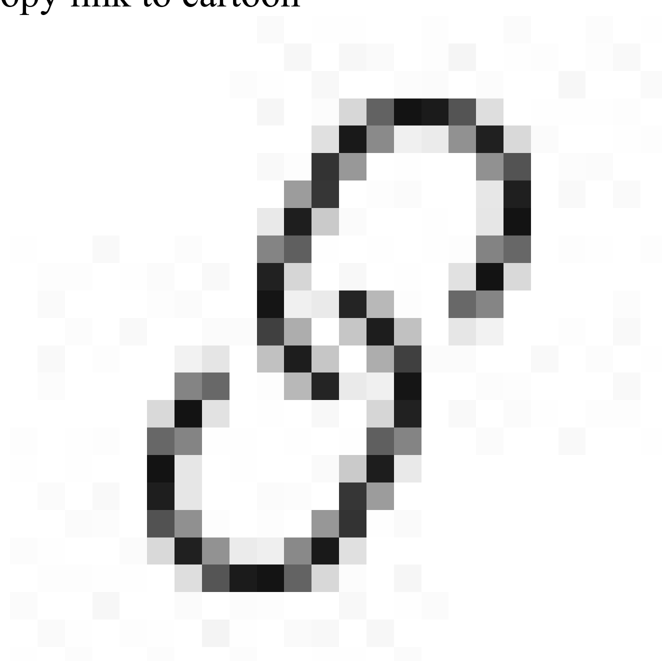
From 1980 to 1985, mail-order industry sales grew by fifty per cent. By the end of the decade, it was estimated that Americans received 13.6 billion catalogues in the mail—fifty for every man, woman, and child. In the nineteen-nineties, though, the industry began to stagnate. J. Crew's brick-

and-mortar stores helped it weather the downturn, but the company was now competing with mall rivals, and navigating a broader cultural shift, from department stores to other brand-driven shops. What distinguished J. Crew from the Gap, Aeropostale, Banana Republic, the Limited, or Benetton was an air of exclusivity. Few of its competitors, often tentacles of the same giant corporations, were run along the idiosyncratic lines that J. Crew was.



"Just say it was a white whale, not a beluga!"
Cartoon by Jimmy Craig

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Shop

Most people nowadays associate J. Crew with Mickey Drexler and Jenna Lyons, its charismatic leaders in the two-thousands. But Bullock offers Cinader and his daughter, Emily Scott, as the brand's often overlooked, original visionaries. Although Cinader himself had no experience with rugby or crew—he attended public schools and a state college—the brand was driven by his sensibility, which those who worked with him found "esoteric, academic, exacting." He revelled in the evocative possibilities of highfalutin language. Sweaters weren't just green or gray, they had "great strains of crumhorn, hautbois, and sackbut." If you recognized that these were words—and perhaps felt the impulse to look them up—you were J. Crew material.

In the nineteen-eighties, the brand's signature pieces were casual and outdoorsy, appealing to men and women alike: striped rugby shirts, barn jackets with pinwale-cord collars, pull-over anoraks. Scott, who joined J. Crew out of college, became a key figure in further refining the company's aesthetic. Bullock describes Scott as wanting to make a catalogue that would be comparable to a fashion magazine. J. Crew moved from Passaic to Chelsea, and it slowly cultivated a reputation for clothes that were versatile and cool, but not inaccessibly so. "The premise was to make the

kinds of clothes I really wanted to wear but just couldn't find," Scott once said. This meant clothing that was well constructed, durable, artfully unpretentious, inspired as much by Ralph Lauren as by the European minimalism of A.P.C. and Agnès B. Once, enamored with an employee's perfectly broken-in Chevignon Army-Navy pants, Scott asked her to take them off so she could snip a sample of the fabric for a manufacturer to replicate.

In the late nineties, Cinader and his family were beginning to feel the stress of growing J. Crew, and they sold eighty-eight per cent of the company in a leveraged buyout by the Texas Pacific Group, a private-equity firm. It was no longer a family-owned company run according to instinct, and it went through a series of managerial transitions. One C.E.O. came from the frozen-foods division of Nestlé; he outlawed the color green as something men didn't buy. A few years later, under different stewardship, J. Crew offered a line that featured nineteen shades of the color.

The rise of Abercrombie & Fitch during this period is part of the larger story. Last year, Netflix released "White Hot: The Rise & Fall of Abercrombie & Fitch," a documentary that explored the brand's heyday, in the late nineteen-nineties and early two-thousands, as it courted teen-agers with a mischievous, upturned-collar version of prep. Compared with J. Crew, Abercrombie was aggressively horny; shirtless models were stationed outside its flagship stores to lure customers, and its catalogues accelerated puberty for a generation of young people. In the high-stakes game of retail brinkmanship, J. Crew classicism suddenly started to "down-trend."

Fashion is cyclical, and though Abercrombie wasn't a rejection of the status quo, in the style of unkempt sixties liberation, it did harness some of the loose emotions of the nineties, offering a rascally alternative to the clean-cut and conformist. "Candidly, we go after the cool kids," Abercrombie's mastermind, Mike Jeffries, told a reporter. "We go after the attractive all-American kid with a great attitude and a lot of friends. A lot of people don't belong [in our clothes], and they can't belong. Are we exclusionary? Absolutely." What was unusual was not so much Jeffries's attitude as his eagerness to say it aloud. J. Crew was never as noisy, which was a matter of both aesthetics and brand positioning.

"The Kingdom of Prep" is, at heart, a business history, and it depicts J. Crew's success, or, anyway, survival, as the result of individual genius. After the company cycled through a series of managers who lacked Cinader and Scott's golden touch, it recovered some of its swagger in the two-thousands, under the leadership of Mickey Drexler. Famed for his tenure at the Gap, where he helped repopularize khakis, Drexler installed an intercom system so he could call in and address all his employees with his latest observations and riffs, even while out of town. In the late two-thousands, Jenna Lyons, a designer whose persona and eclectic personal style became synonymous with the brand, attracted a devoted following. Drexler and Lyons launched Madewell, a more trend-responsive line targeted at younger women, and, in 2008, introduced the Ludlow, a slim-fitting suit that remains one of J. Crew's most popular products. Soon, a generation of thirtysomething men was overinvesting in gingham, chambray, and sports coats.

The brand's public apex was the 2009 Inauguration of Barack Obama. His wife, Michelle, and their daughters, Sasha and Malia, all wore J. Crew pieces, making the brand seem like the affordable uniform for this hopeful, post-everything moment. The fact that J. Crew made clothes that you could wear from elementary school through adulthood contributed to the sense that this was a uniform for a new America. The next day, the company's Web site crashed from a barrage of traffic. J. Crew was now firmly part of the establishment, and officially accessible to all. Lyons became the kind of celebrity influencer whose whereabouts were tracked on gossip sites. (In 2011, she came under fire by conservative media outlets, for a catalogue spread in which she painted her son's toenails pink.) Almost single-handedly, she moved the brand from a fixation on Americana to a more eclectic, modern interpretation of prep, where khakis and cable-knit sweaters coexisted with sequins and oversized jewelry.

But already J. Crew was falling on hard times, as were many of its onetime competitors: Abercrombie, the Gap, even Brooks Brothers. Under Drexler, in 2011, the company took on immense amounts of debt after another leveraged buyout. And it struggled to respond to the rise of athleisure, casual workwear, and fast fashion, as brands like Zara and H&M—and, more recently, Shein—prospered by selling cheap, trendy clothes not meant to be worn more than a dozen times. A "retail apocalypse" hobbled brick-and-

mortar stores; at the same time, J. Crew didn't adjust quickly enough to the new expectations of online shopping.

In "The Kingdom of Prep," Bullock laments the "never-ending fire sale" of the company's recent years, when anything she wanted would be discounted within months, making the brand seem weak and directionless. In fashion, as with society at large, it seems as though the middle disappeared: consumers gravitated toward high-end luxury or fast fashion, not moderately priced uniforms for blending in with the establishment. Meanwhile, a considerable number of young shoppers have begun resisting the churn of new products altogether. A desire for ethical forms of consumption—bolstered by concern over one's carbon footprint—has pushed many teens and twentysomethings toward secondhand clothing. (On the upscale side, venders include the RealReal and Rent the Runway.) It's currently a thirty-billion-dollar market and growing fast.

Then, too, the nostalgic air of preppy style could acquire troubling resonances in an age of political fracture. When white supremacists descended on Charlottesville for the 2017 Unite the Right rally, for instance, many wore polo shirts and khakis as an expression of heritage. The effect, as the writer Amdé Mengistu described it, was "as if Quentin Tarantino had drunkenly shot a J. Crew catalogue."

"The Kingdom of Prep" recounts an absorbing story from the viewpoint of the visionaries, and the "competitive, deeply bonded believers" who worked for them. Yet consumers are the ones who determine which ideas survive. In the 2022 podcast series "American Ivy," the journalist Avery Trufelman argues that prep remains the foundation of American dress, which makes it an appealing template for everyone from Christian nationalists to the Lo Lifes, a group of Black and brown shoplifters from Brooklyn who became infamous in the eighties and nineties for their obsession with Ralph Lauren's most exuberant designs. "The clothes were made for the upper-class preppy kids from Yale and Harvard," Thirstin Howl III, a rapper and prominent group member, said. "And you know some kids from the ghetto just took it, remixed it, and we made it our own."

I'm of a generation that believes Ralph Lauren peaked with his "Snow Beach" line, immortalized by Raekwon, of the Wu-Tang Clan, in the 1994

video for “Can It Be All So Simple.” Before rappers had the resources to build their own fashion empires, they often repurposed what was available to them, and in the nineteen-nineties the beneficiary of this was prep. The style’s route to fashion was through hip-hop, as rappers imagined new ways of wearing old clothes, giving brands like Polo, Tommy Hilfiger, and Nautica unexpected cachet that had nothing to do with dreams of emulating the Wasp life style. Because prep was always about resisting the winds of fashion, it was a turning point when designers like Hilfiger returned the love—Aaliyah famously starred in a 1996 Tommy Jeans ad campaign, and there were reports that a 1999 mixtape featuring underground rappers, all commissioned to rhapsodize about the brand, would feature a well-placed “Tommy!” to bleep out any offensive language. If clothes tell stories, the meaning of those stories is woven, sometimes unintentionally, by those who wear them as well as by those who make them. These days, I find myself trawling through Depop, a vintage resale site, hoping to rebuy some of my teen-age clothes, in the onset of a uniquely postmodern midlife crisis. The unlined plaid J. Crew jacket from the early nineties: maybe this prep relic can reconnect me to a kind of grungy, teen-age moxie.

Earlier this year, a fashion writer named Derek Guy experienced a curious uptick in his Twitter count. He’d built a robust following because of his expert opinions on subjects like cashmere sweaters and bespoke suiting, which he interspersed with jokey memes about Japanese workwear or hype culture. But now, owing to a change in Twitter’s algorithm, he began showing up in enough people’s feeds to warrant a series of articles about why “menswear guy” was suddenly everywhere.

Guy is opinionated about both classic, formal approaches to attire and contemporary streetwear. And he has long championed J. Crew as a low-risk entry point for men hoping to dress better; in one interview, he likened the brand to the best-selling radical historian Howard Zinn, describing it as a kind of gateway influence. A couple of years ago, J. Crew—having filed for bankruptcy early in the pandemic and undergone a period of restructuring—appointed Brendon Babenzien as its men’s creative director. He was formerly the design director of the streetwear brand Supreme and the co-founder and designer of Noah, and he opened a clubby concept store and coffee shop in downtown Manhattan. (It hosted a book party for me last fall.)

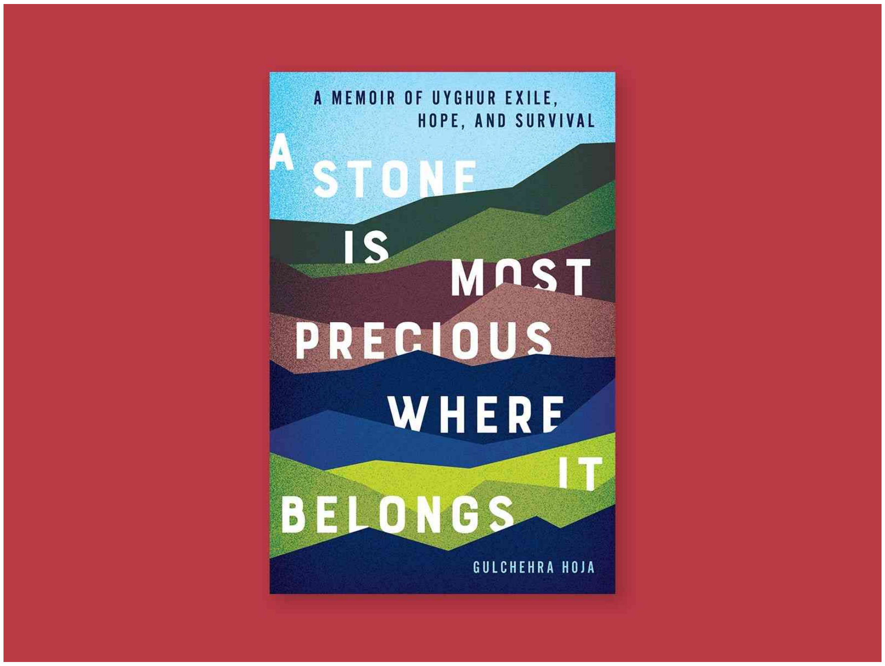
When Babenzien's first J. Crew collection débuted to great acclaim, last July, Guy noted that the designs were virtually indistinguishable from more expensive, fetishized brands, such as Margaret Howell, Drake's, Aimé Leon Dore, or Beams Plus. "If your purchases at 'edgy' brands like our legacy and visvim are limited to boxy tees and ever-so-slightly different jeans . . . you also look like you're wearing j crew," he wrote in a Twitter post. "Everyone is in jcrew. this is the reality." Guy thought that J. Crew's stigma as a "mid-tier" brand prevented people from appreciating this. J. Crew had become too accessible. Babenzien's line—complete with a look book set at a lakefront boathouse, harking back to the brand's roots—was a reminder of how interwoven the style had become with American dress, how ubiquitous its vibe was. As a business, J. Crew may continue to rise and fall, but as a sartorial sensibility its victory is secure. Whether as rebels or loyalists, we're all fated to be subjects in the kingdom of prep. ♦

By Nathan Heller

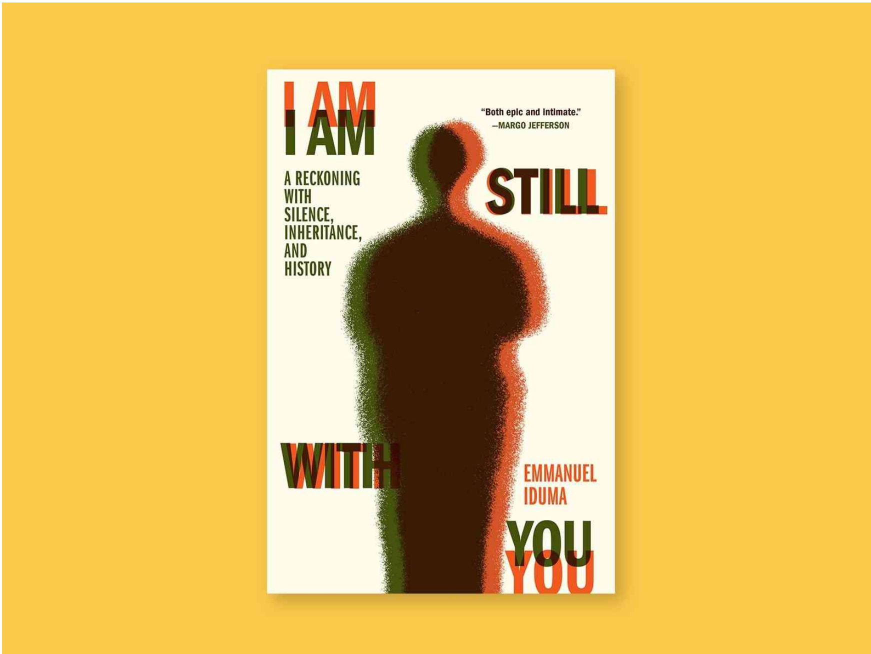
By Naomi Fry

By Bruce Handy

By Lauren Collins



A Stone Is Most Precious Where It Belongs, *by Gulchehra Hoja (Hachette)*. This chronicle of the transformations of the Uyghur homeland of Xinjiang opens in 2018, on a night when more than twenty members of Hoja's family were arrested, after she began reporting on the Uyghur internment camps run by the Chinese government. Hoja recounts sweet childhood memories of life in Ürümqi, and the way that locals gradually found themselves to be strangers in their own land, when activities like texting someone overseas or watching Turkish soap operas became excuses for arrest. Descriptions of catastrophe are interspersed with lines of quiet devastation. Hoja's decision to move to America for her career ripped "a hole" in her family: "the hole would slowly close, like a wound healing over time. But it would knit back together with me on the outside."

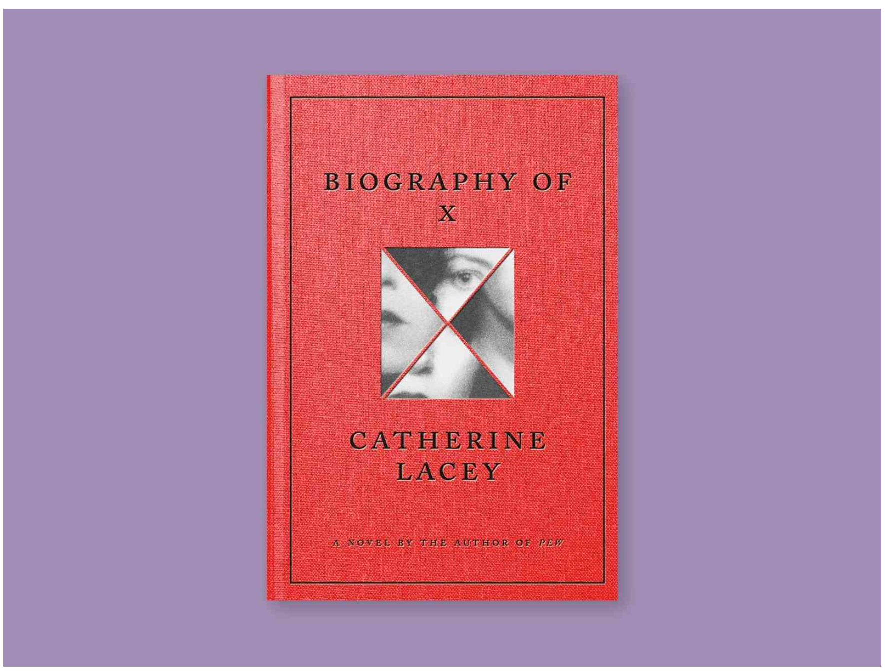


I Am Still with You, *by Emmanuel Iduma (Algonquin)*. Combining memoir and travel writing, Iduma uses personal loss—of close relatives—to reflect on the history of the "faultily amalgamated" country of Nigeria. Rummaging through derelict regional archives and filling lacunae with his relatives' memories, he attempts to piece together the story of his namesake, an uncle who died in the Biafran War. After the war, this uncle frequently appeared in the dreams of the oldest man in their family, and Iduma draws a parallel with the ghostly unresolved tensions around the conflict, which is not taught in many Nigerian schools. This adroitly crafted work seeks closure for "a generation that has to lift itself from the hushes and gaps of the history of the war."

The Best Books of 2023

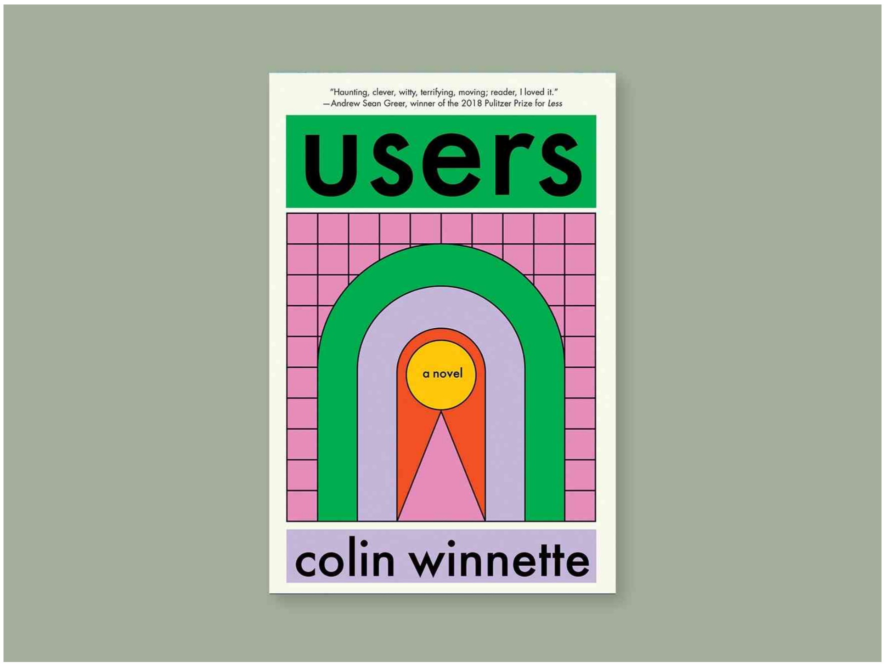


Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Biography of X, *by Catherine Lacey (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. In this intricate, metafictional novel, a recently widowed writer embarks on a biography of her late wife, an enigmatic artist, author, and musician known only as X. As the writer delves deeper into X's life and work—distinguished

by X's penchant for adopting Cindy Shermanesque personae—Lacey unfolds a startling counter-history, in which the United States has just reunified, having dissolved, after the Second World War, into three states: one liberal, one libertarian, and one theocratic. Throughout, Lacey artfully blends historical anecdotes—X is seen penning songs for David Bowie and attending openings with Richard Serra—into her fictional universe, making uncomfortable connections between X's fragile world and our own.



Users, *by Colin Winnette (Soft Skull)*. The protagonist of this novel is a virtual-reality designer who crafts popular "Original Experiences," which draw on his most disturbing memories: "That way, the whole thing could be forgotten, or at least its potency could be reduced." But one day the designer begins receiving death threats, and shortly afterward ethical concerns about the technology arise. As the designer seeks to resolve both problems, his world metamorphoses into an augmented reality itself: his wife and daughters, chillingly unknowable, remain nameless for much of the book; their house, under constant renovation, becomes an unfamiliar maze.

By John Cassidy

By Cara Blue Adams

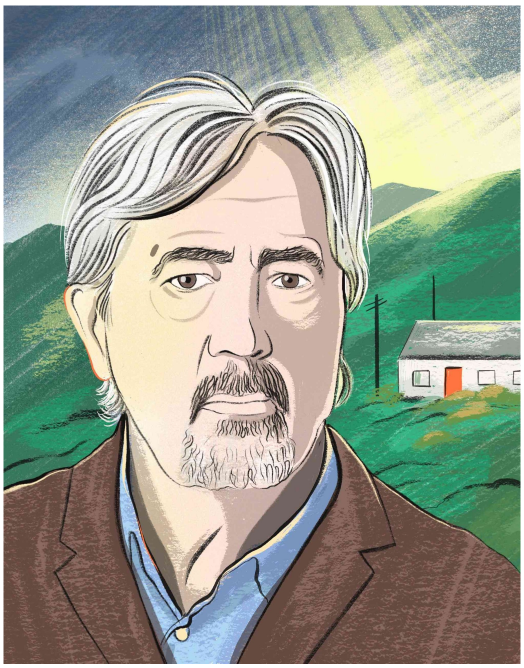
By Hua Hsu

By Katy Waldman

The Accursed Brilliance of Sebastian Barry

Combining verbal exuberance and narrative intricacy, Barry reimagines the hauntings of Irish history.

By Giles Harvey



The Irish historian Roy Foster was recently asked to explain one of the great riddles of world literature. How was it, the interviewer wanted to know, that a sparsely peopled island on the margins of Europe had managed to produce such a hoard of canonical writers? At a bare minimum, the list would have to include Swift, Sterne, Yeats, Wilde, Shaw, Synge, Joyce, Beckett. Though how could you fail to mention Flann O'Brien? Or Frank O'Connor? For that matter, what about Elizabeth Bowen, William Trevor, and Seamus Heaney? And this is to say nothing of the extraordinary crop of living talent—from Edna O'Brien to Sally Rooney—whose accustomed toil continues to enrich the tradition.

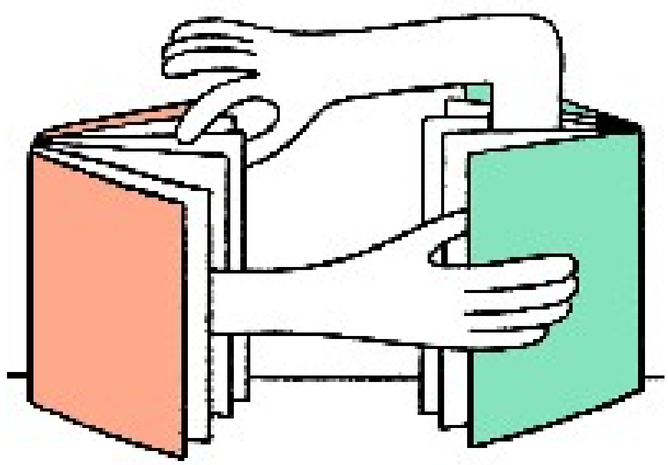
Instead of reaching for grand theories to account for this remarkable literary surplus, Foster did that very Irish thing: he told a story. One summer, he said, he'd been on holiday in County Kerry when the trunk of his aged

Volvo became jammed. At a nearby garage, Foster asked the mechanic if he ought to take the car back to the dealership. The mechanic didn't think so. He gave the trunk a good whack with his wrench, and just like that it sprang open. "In matters like this," the man said sagely, "Volvo dealers wield no special magic."

For Foster, the words were a small but irresistible example of Irish English, the unusually pungent dialect, or set of dialects, native to his homeland. Because English was imposed on Ireland over hundreds of years of colonial rule—it had all but replaced the indigenous tongue by the late nineteenth century—the Irish have never entirely made peace with it. "His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech," Joyce's Stephen Dedalus thinks, of his English dean, in "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" (1916): "I have not made or accepted its words."

The Best Books We Read This Week

Read our reviews of notable new fiction and nonfiction, updated every Wednesday.



What Joyce and his countrymen did do was to remake English, molding the language of the ruling élite into something beguilingly subversive, an unstable compound of familiar and foreign. If you want to understand Irish

literature's extraordinary richness, Foster suggested, the special magic of everyday Irish speech is a good place to start.

Few contemporary writers have done more with the natural resource of Irish English, or with the buried tensions at the heart of Irish identity, than Sebastian Barry, who made his name as a playwright before emerging as one of Europe's leading novelists. To open one of Barry's books is to be hit by a great gale of talk. In "Days Without End" (2017), the talker is Thomas McNulty, who has fled the Great Famine of the eighteen-forties and come to live in the United States. For want of other work, McNulty joins the Army, where many of his compatriots have also wound up. "You know a Irishman because he has it writ all over him," he says in his vividly skewed English, which he has acquired only since arriving in America. "He speaks some other way and he is not a great man for hair cutting generally and there's something about a Irish when he is drinking that just ain't like any other human being. Don't tell me a Irish is an example of civilised humanity." If you're Irish, of course, so-called civilized humanity may be more a term of abuse than of approbation.

Barry was born in Dublin in the nineteen-fifties, a few years after the newly declared Irish Republic severed its last remaining formal bonds with Britain. Back then, the young nation had a copper-fastened sense of itself as a land of Catholic piety and tradition, the home "of a people living the life that God desires that men should live," as the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Éamon de Valera put it in a famous speech. This people worshipped not only God but also their own past, in particular the men of 1916, who led the Easter Rising against British rule, and the larger cohort who finished the job in the War of Independence (1919-1921). By the time Barry was a child, the revolutionary era, with its large cast of heroes, had already hardened into myth.

Like all national foundation myths, the Irish one was necessarily partial (in both senses of the word), and the goal of Barry's fictional project has been to nuance and augment it. This has often involved telling the stories of those written out of Irish history, or included merely as cartoon villains. Barry hasn't had to look far to find examples of such figures. His paternal great-grandfather, a Catholic, was a chief superintendent of the Dublin Metropolitan Police during British rule, which in the eyes of Irish nationalists made him the worst kind of traitor. In Barry's play "The Steward

of Christendom" (1995), set in the early nineteen-thirties, a decade after Irish independence, he appears as Thomas Dunne, an enfeebled, Lear-like old man, who babbles of his vanished prestige in a rural psychiatric home. The play isn't out to rehabilitate Dunne, who was responsible for vicious repression; it does want to rehumanize him, to show that he believed he was only doing his duty.

The Dunne family has been a deep well of material for Barry. He went back to it for his astonishing novel "A Long Long Way" (2005), which tells the story of Thomas's son, Willie, who volunteers to fight for king and country in the First World War. An innocent boy of seventeen, Willie is unprepared not just for the horror of the trenches but also for the deracinating identity crisis that follows the Easter Rising, whose leaders called on Germany and the other Central Powers ("Our gallant allies in Europe") to help them oust the British from Ireland. If the rebels consider the Germans their allies, Willie wonders, then what does that make him?

It is typical of Barry, a writer of almost Joycean amplitude, that this essentially tragic tale should be packed with moments of comedy and joy. In the midst of death, Willie and his comrades are very much in life, singing and joking and telling stories. Willie is a gifted singer who has made a specialty of Schubert's aria "Ave Maria." The sergeant major of his company, a high-spirited man named Christy Moran, repeatedly asks him to sing it for the men, though he can never quite get the Latin title right: "For fuck's sake and the love of God, would you give us your 'Half of Mary', please." Moran's world-class swearing is one of the book's great pleasures. "The fucking cunting thing is after biting the thumb off me," he says when he cuts himself on a piece of barbed wire during a night patrol, "the fucking bastarding cunting piece of English shite." (That piquant "is after biting" is the Hiberno-English way of forming the past tense.) The company captain is quick to shush him:

> "Moran, leave off the giving out, man, a bit of god-forsaken ciuneas, if you will," said Captain Pasley.
>
> "A bit of what, sir?" said Christy, sucking the little berry of blood off his finger.

> “Quiet, quiet. Do you not speak any Irish, Sergeant-Major?” said Captain Pasley in a friendly way.
>
> “I don’t fucking speak Irish, sir, I don’t even fucking speak English.”

Moran’s joke is double-edged. He clearly does speak English—a more colorful English than most Englishmen speak—but, like Stephen Dedalus, he is never quite at home in the language. What’s more, there were many Irish veterans who came back from the killing fields of Europe to discover that they no longer felt at home in their own country. Like the Americans who served in Vietnam, these men were given a hero’s sendoff but returned (those who made it back alive) to find themselves the objects of suspicion or contempt. The brutal British crackdown following the Rising had transformed the national mood; there was no place in Ireland’s emerging self-conception for men like Willie Dunne. “How could a fella go out and fight for his country,” Willie thinks bitterly, “when his country would dissolve behind him like sugar in the rain?”

All Barry’s characters find themselves wrong-footed by history in this way, caught between identities in a no man’s land of indifference and neglect. Tom Kettle, the protagonist of Barry’s latest novel, “Old God’s Time” (Viking), is no exception. Kettle is a retired policeman living alone in a coastal Dublin suburb during the mid-nineteen-nineties. As we slowly come to learn, Kettle spent his childhood in an orphanage, where the boys were serially raped by the Christian Brothers who ran the place—or, in Kettle’s understandably squeamish poeticism, “put to the sword of their lust.” Such institutions were full of the children of “fallen” women, from whom they were often separated at birth. The mothers (Kettle never knew his) would be confined to the so-called Magdalene asylums, where they provided free labor for the local community. The system was nothing less than an Irish Gulag, its inmates nonpersons, placed beyond the pale of citizenship.

“Old God’s Time” shows how Kettle made a narrow escape from this state-sanctioned hell into the blessed normality of middle-class life. The escape came at a cost, though. As a police officer, Kettle was forced into complicity with the system that brutalized him. “Girls fleeing from laundries, children fleeing from orphanages, all had to be returned,” he recalls of his days on the force. There was no law dictating this; it was just how things were done in a

Catholic nation that valued social "harmony" above individual rights. To challenge the status quo was to jeopardize one's precious place within it.

This state of affairs persisted until the nineteen-nineties, when the Church began to lose its theocratic grip on the state. It was a time of reckoning in Irish public life, and Kettle soon finds himself caught up in it. At the start of the novel, his solitary existence is disturbed by an unannounced visit from two former colleagues. They want to know what he can tell them about an unsolved case he worked on in the nineteen-sixties, involving two priests accused of sexually assaulting children. One of the pair was murdered, and the killer has never been found; the other got off scot-free when the Archbishop of Dublin declined to take action and the matter was dropped, but new evidence has now emerged, and a conviction appears within reach.

Such an opening seems to prime us for a piece of high-end genre work, but this is just the first of Barry's feints. It's not that he's uninterested in the procedural dimension of his story, which generates its share of action and suspense; he simply has other, less conventional, ambitions. These are signalled by the novel's epigraph, which comes from the Book of Job. With his horrific childhood, Kettle would seem to have endured more than enough pain for one lifetime, but his creator has further trials to inflict on him. In the years before the novel opens, Kettle has lost his wife and two adult children to an escalating sequence of tragedies and now subsists on a diet of fantasy and nostalgia. Like Thomas Dunne, in "The Steward of Christendom," he isn't merely a social outcast; he is also metaphysically divided, adrift between past and present, the imagined and the real. His daughter, Winnie, who died of a heroin overdose, is always dropping in to chat; pages of conversation go by before he grasps that he is simply talking to himself.

Other spectres haunt the book. Kettle lives in a Victorian mansion that's been divided into flats. One of these has recently been occupied by an actress and her young son. The first time Kettle meets his new neighbor, who is going by her maiden name, Miss McNulty, she tells him she's in hiding from her violent husband. Kettle, who keeps a gun or two lying around, vows to protect them.

Barry's artistry is such that you can read almost the entire book without realizing an essential fact about Miss McNulty and her son: they are ghosts,

of a kind. This aspect of the novel doesn't lend itself to paraphrase, but certain details appear to suggest that Kettle's neighbors are apparitions from the nineteen-sixties—or that Kettle himself has somehow stepped back thirty years into the past. As "Old God's Time" wears on, it reveals itself to be a Möbius strip of a book, in which the "real" plot, involving Kettle's old investigation, is slowly superseded by this paranormal one. The effect is peculiar, and it leaves the reader with an urgent question: What in God's name is going on?

Our natural impulse is to psychologize Kettle—to see the imperilled mother and child as projections of his unspooling mind, a way for him to metabolize the guilt and impotence he feels over the death of his own family or the innocents whom he failed to rescue in his years of police work. This account doesn't quite square, though. Readers of Barry's novel "The Temporary Gentleman" (2014) will recognize Miss McNulty as Maggie, the daughter of that book's narrator, Jack McNulty, who has appeared in other works by Barry and also makes a cameo here. (Maggie and Jack are descendants of Thomas McNulty, from "Days Without End," and are based loosely on Barry's own mother and grandfather.) In other words, Kettle hasn't simply dreamed these people up; they seem to have an existence independent of his thoughts.

Barry is fond of the notion, often credited to Einstein, that time is illusory. "Everything is always there, still unfolding, still happening," the aged narrator of his novel "The Secret Scripture" (2008) says. Many writers, from Jorge Luis Borges to James Cameron, have explored the narrative implications of this theory, with results that tend toward the fantastical. What's striking about "Old God's Time" is the scrupulous realism that Barry brings to his outlandish premise—and his guileful refusal ever to clarify what kind of novel we are reading. The effect is one of bracing instability, as we are forced to partake of Kettle's own confusion. Are his seeming gifts of transtemporal perception some sort of cosmic recompense for everything he's suffered, like God's voice speaking to Job out of the whirlwind? Or is he simply in desperate flight from what Yeats once called "the desolation of reality"?

In the end, the best way to understand Kettle may be as an eccentric portrait of Sebastian Barry, a writer of historical fiction who has described himself

as a sort of human radio, picking up frequencies from the long ago. In “Old God’s Time,” those frequencies carry the music of Kettle’s abundant inner life. Like Willie Dunne and his comrades, Kettle remains, in the midst of untold anguish, a “very living man,” intensely receptive to the world and its marvels. Barry’s casually exquisite prose, capable of lyrical expansion but always firmly rooted in the dialect of the tribe, seems to capture them all. It gives us the “roast-beef skin” of a man’s face, and a woman’s garnet necklace, the stones “held tense on her lined neck, like insects on the very point of dispersal.” It gives us a view of the sea through a rifle scope, “the cormorants right in front of his nose, it seemed like, and the very barnacles on the black rocks, and the heavy skirts of dark-brown seaweed, shrugging in the late tide.” It gives us the sky on an overcast day:

> how the great lid of cloud had been raised, as if all the country and sea beneath had now been properly slow-cooked, and how the veins of struggling sunlight dropped from the upper cloud now like leaking waterfalls, as if light itself were a celestial flood and couldn’t but fall under the rules of gravity, like all created things.

In such passages, Barry gives us his “Half of Mary”—a great demotic aria to existence, which, for all its grief and abjection, he sees as something full of grace. ♦

By Ali Fitzgerald

By Françoise Mouly

By Nathan Heller

By Alex Carp

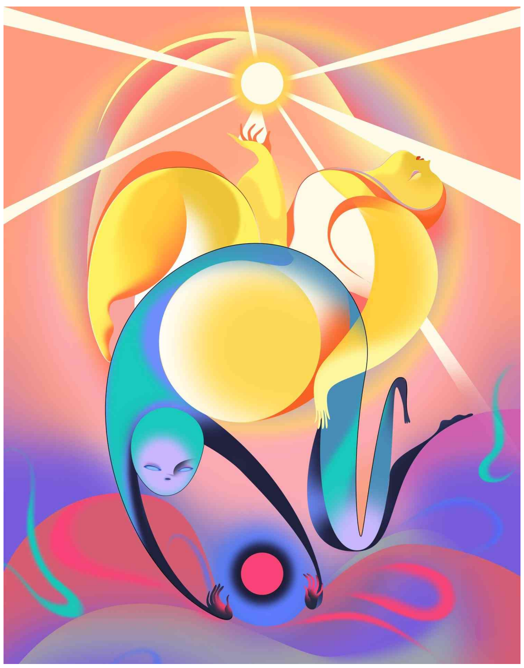
Brave New World Dept.

- **Will the Ozempic Era Change How We Think About Being Fat and Being Thin?**

Will the Ozempic Era Change How We Think About Being Fat and Being Thin?

A popular, growing class of drugs for obesity and diabetes could, in an ideal world, help us see that metabolism and appetite are biological facts, not moral choices.

By [Jia Tolentino]



The ideal female body of the past decade, born through the godless alliance of Instagram and the Kardashian family, was as juicy and uncanny as a silicone-injected peach. Young women all over the Internet copied the shape—a sculpted waist, an enormous ass, hips that spread generously underneath a high-cut bikini—and also the face atop it, a contoured hybrid of recognizably human mannequin and sexy feline. This prototype was as technologically mediated as the era that produced it; women attained the look by injecting artificial substances, removing natural ones, and altering photographic evidence.

Dana Omari, a registered dietitian and an Instagram influencer in Houston, has accumulated a quarter of a million followers by documenting the blepharoplasties, breast implants, and Brazilian butt lifts of the rich and famous. Recently, she noticed that the human weathervanes of the social-media beauty standard were spinning in a new direction. The Kardashians were shrinking. Having previously appropriated styles created by Black women, they were now leaning into a skinnier, whiter ideal. Kim dropped twenty-one pounds before the Met Gala, where she wore a dress made famous by Marilyn Monroe; Khloé, who has spoken in the past about struggling with her weight, posted fortieth-birthday photos in which she looked as slim and blond as a Barbie. All over Instagram, the wealthy and the professionally attractive were showing newly prominent clavicles and rib cages. Last spring, Omari shared with her followers the open secret behind such striking thinness: the Kardashians and others, she insisted, were likely taking semaglutide, the active ingredient in the medication Ozempic. "This is the 'diabetic shot' for weight loss everyone's been talking about," she wrote. "Really good sources have told me that Kim and Khloé allegedly started on their Ozempic journey last year." Omari was about to start taking a version of the medication herself.

Ozempic, which is manufactured by Novo Nordisk, is part of an expanding class of drugs called GLP-1 receptor agonists, which have dramatically altered the treatment of diabetes and obesity. Ozempic is approved by the Food and Drug Administration only for the treatment of Type 2 diabetes—a condition that accounts for ninety per cent of all diabetes cases—and has been available since 2017. Its name is now shorthand for the entire category of weight-loss injections. In 2021, Novo Nordisk received approval for Wegovy, which has the same active ingredient as Ozempic but comes with a higher maximum dose, as an anti-obesity drug. On a year-end earnings call in 2022, Novo Nordisk cited worldwide market growth of fifty per cent, with almost forty thousand new Wegovy prescriptions being written every week.

Podcast: The New Yorker Radio Hour
Listen to Jia Tolentino talk with David Remnick about Ozempic.

The drugs mimic a hormone called glucagon-like peptide-1, which stimulates insulin production and suppresses the production of glucagon, which raises blood sugar. The body naturally releases GLP-1 after a meal,

and the hormone travels to the brain, triggering the feeling of fullness. GLP-1 drugs effectively inject that sense of satiety, and also slow the rate at which food empties out of the stomach; patients generally report a freedom from cravings and an inability to overeat without becoming ill. “I’m convinced that this basically replaced a signal my body has been missing my whole life,” a commenter in a Reddit group for people using semaglutide wrote recently. “All I can say,” a member of an online group called Lose the Fat wrote, “is that it is no wonder that skinny people think heavy people have no willpower. Their brains actually do tell them to stop eating. I had no idea.”

More than forty per cent of Americans are obese, and eleven per cent have been given a diagnosis of Type 2 diabetes. Both conditions involve metabolic dysfunction: Type 2 diabetes is characterized by resistance to insulin, a trait that tends to develop as a person gains fat; insulin resistance leads to high blood sugar, which increases the risk of stroke, heart disease, nerve damage, and more. Obesity is correlated with, among other things, higher rates of cancer, sleep apnea, and liver disease. For people living with these risks, the new medications may be a godsend. “These drugs are groundbreaking,” Dr. Cole Barfield, an internal-medicine specialist in Nashville, told me, noting that they can spur greater weight loss and more effectively decrease blood-sugar levels than previous frontline treatments—and, unlike many other medications for these conditions, they do not put patients at risk of major cardiovascular events.

There are, however, complications. Initial side effects (diarrhea, vomiting, constipation, dizziness, nausea) can be gnarly enough to send people to the E.R. Patients can also experience hair loss, a result that—like the gaunt look that has been termed, not without Schadenfreude, “Ozempic face”—is caused by rapid weight loss rather than by the drug itself. In rare cases, patients might develop renal failure, pancreatitis, or intestinal obstruction. Also, GLP-1 drugs are expensive—often more than a thousand dollars a month out of pocket—and insurance companies frequently refuse to cover them. (Weight-loss drugs are not required to be covered by Medicaid.) Still, about a year ago, Barfield noticed an influx of patients who came in asking for Ozempic by name. “I’d guess this was probably when people started posting TikToks about the celebrities being on it,” he said.

“Everyone is suddenly showing up 25 pounds lighter,” Andy Cohen, the TV producer who created the “Real Housewives” franchise, tweeted in September. “What happens when they stop taking #Ozempic?????” Celebrities have generally denied the accusation. “I get up 5 days a week at 6am to train,” Khloé Kardashian wrote on Instagram. “Please stop with your assumptions.” Omari stifled a giggle when I asked her about such denials, which tend to be, subtly or otherwise, less than categorical. One can, and should, exercise in addition to taking GLP-1 drugs. And you can say you’re not taking Ozempic if you’re actually taking Mounjaro—a newer, similar drug, manufactured by Eli Lilly & Co., that is producing even more drastic results in clinical studies—or if you’re getting an off-brand version of the medication from a compounding pharmacy. Such pharmacies, which offer custom medications, often make drugs for people who have allergies to common ingredients, or who need commercially unavailable dosages, or who can swallow a liquid but not pills. But they are also allowed to compound drugs that are on a list kept by the F.D.A. of drugs that are in short supply, as low-dose Ozempic now is. (The shortage is not of the medication but of the devices used to inject it, which Novo Nordisk has not been able to manufacture fast enough to meet demand.) “I’m on compounded semaglutide, and I will tell you, I eat like a toddler,” Omari told her followers in January.

It is possible to imagine a different universe in which the discovery of semaglutide was an unalloyed good—a powerful tool to untangle the knot of genetic tendencies, environmental forces, and behaviors that conspire to make more and more Americans gain weight. We might recognize metabolism and appetite as biological facts rather than as moral choices; rising rates of Type 2 diabetes and obesity around the globe could be reversed. In the actual universe that we inhabit, the people who most need semaglutide often struggle to get it, and its arrival seems to have prompted less a public consideration of what it means to be fat than a renewed fixation on being thin.

In the Renaissance and for centuries afterward, the Platonic ideal of the female body in the West was defined by proportionality: Rubens’s expressive fleshiness, the gentle undulations of Botticelli’s Venus. Then the Industrial Revolution produced increasingly sedentary life styles and easier access to food, not to mention standardized dress sizes. The diet industry

roared to life: thyroid extract was packed into pills and sold under names such as Corpulin and Frank J. Kellogg's Safe Fat Reducer; there were "reducing salons" where women could have their flesh rolled and squeezed by machines. Women's magazines enshrined the idea that high-class whiteness could be expressed through a thin body, and articulated a horror of fat and of cultures that valued it. An essay published in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1897 refers to fatness as a "crime" and a "deformity," and argues that a fat woman "will not be a social success unless she burnt-cork herself, don beads, and then go to that burning clime where women, like pigs, are valued at so much a pound."

People have been pushing back against fat stigma since at least the nineteen-sixties, when activists staged a "fat-in" at the Sheep Meadow in Central Park. But the desire to achieve thinness by any means necessary—amphetamines, grapefruit diets, SlimFast—remains an almost foundational tenet of female socialization. When I was a preteen, in the heroin-chic nineties, pro-anorexia Web sites proliferated on the Internet; in the early two-thousands, teen girls puked or did obsessive sit-ups or took Hydroxycut in pursuit of abs like Britney Spears's. In the twenty-tens, even as the Kardashians ostentatiously displayed their curves, they sold Flat Tummy Co. teas—laxatives—and waist trainers. And young women now are just a tap away from a never-ending social-media parade of aspirational bodies. A Harvard study, drawing on data from the Implicit Association Test, which asks people to sort words and images into "good" and "bad" categories, found that implicit bias against fat people actually grew from 2007 to 2016, with eighty-one per cent of people exhibiting it by the end of the study. Every other implicit bias in the study—regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and disability—waned during that period.

The cultural fear of fat plays a role in the negative outcomes associated with it. Doctors—about a third of whom, in one study, reported viewing their obese patients as "sloppy" and "lazy"—frequently misdiagnose, undertreat, or shame fat people, who then accumulate reasons to distrust medical care. (In one notable case, a forty-six-year-old woman went to see an obesity specialist at Georgetown University, complaining of shortness of breath; he told her she should go on a diet. It turned out that she had life-threatening blood clots.) Obesity correlates with poverty, and Black and Hispanic adults are more likely to be fat than white ones; the general attitude toward fat

people allows an aversion to poor people and nonwhites to be expressed as moral concern. The belief that fatness in itself is neither ugly nor alarming is sometimes misinterpreted, ingenuously or otherwise, as a complete disregard for the connection between health and weight gain. I recently went to a doctor's appointment in uptown Manhattan, during which it came up in conversation that I was writing about Ozempic. The doctor put down her stethoscope and turned to me. "You know, I love Lizzo," she said immediately. "But it's a shame that this whole body-positivity movement has made so many people think that it's O.K. to be obese."

In fact, both thinness and fatness can be the result of disordered eating, and both are dangerous at the extremes. In 1958, a physiologist named Ancel Keys initiated a long-term study in seven countries concerning the relationship between diet and cardiac health; later, analyzing the data, he found that very thin and very heavy people carried the greatest risks for heart disease. But Keys concentrated his worry on obesity, a condition he referred to as "disgusting" and "repugnant." He revived something called the Quetelet Index—concocted in the nineteenth century by the Belgian mathematician Adolphe Quetelet, in an effort to identify the statistically average man ("the type of perfection," Quetelet called him)—and gave it a new name: the body-mass index. By the nineteen-eighties, B.M.I. had become the standard method of assessing a person's health via her weight.

Today, someone's weight is deemed healthy if her B.M.I. falls between 18 and 24.9; between 25 and 30, a person is overweight; beyond that, she has obesity. But Quetelet's research subjects were European men, and his formula is less accurate at indicating the health of women and of people who are Black, Hispanic, or Asian. More generally, the index implies a precise weight-to-health correlation that does not actually exist. A recent study examined subjects' B.M.I.s in relation to their blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and insulin resistance. Nearly a third of people with a "normal" B.M.I. had unhealthy metabolic metrics, and nearly half of those who were technically overweight were metabolically healthy. About a quarter of those who were classified as obese were healthy, too.

A healthy body can generally signal to the brain when it has had enough food. But that signalling system can be faulty, or get injured. "One of the most important things about obesity, and something most people don't

understand, is that, in the process of gaining weight, the neural circuitry of the brain that regulates weight is damaged," Dr. Louis Aronne, the director of the Comprehensive Weight Control Center, at Weill Cornell Medicine, told me. (Aronne, like many other prominent practitioners of obesity medicine, has consulted on trials conducted by Novo Nordisk.) "The hypothalamus shows signs of inflammation and injury," he went on. The prevailing theory, he explained, is that "too many calories coming in too quickly damages nerves that respond to the hormones that control body weight." One of these hormones is leptin, which is produced in body fat, and which signals to the brain that it's time to stop eating. But, if you gain fat, the oversupply of leptin can cause your body to be desensitized to it, making your brain erroneously believe that you are starving. "Your body tries to rebalance the system by slowing down the metabolism and increasing appetite," Aronne said. After a person has gained enough weight to enter this cycle of metabolic misdirection, it becomes nearly impossible to lose that weight and keep it off long-term simply through diet and exercise. (About five per cent of people manage to do it.) A well-known study followed contestants on "The Biggest Loser," the weight-loss-competition show, and found that the contestants' metabolisms slowed so drastically after their weight loss that nearly all of them regained what they'd lost. One contestant, who'd dropped an astonishing two hundred and thirty-nine pounds, soon regained a hundred, and then began gaining weight whenever he ate more than eight hundred calories *less* than the average amount recommended for a man his size.

"No one in my family is skinny—we're just not built that way," Jamel Corona, a thirty-seven-year-old Mexican American mother of two in Illinois, told me. Corona had been overweight for most of her life, she said; she was a size 12 in sixth grade. "I've never had a bad relationship with food, and I've always worked out," she said. In college, she ate the same amount as the girls she lived with in her sorority house, but she was bigger, and gaining weight. Later, when she got pregnant, she developed gestational diabetes. (Diabetes also ran in her family, with most of her aunts and uncles dealing with Type 2.) During her second pregnancy, she had to give herself daily insulin injections; her blood-sugar levels "just kept going up and up and up." After she gave birth, she gained forty pounds in her first three months postpartum. Her endocrinologist suggested Wegovy. "It was either that I try

this, or that I would come back in six months and probably go on insulin again," she said.

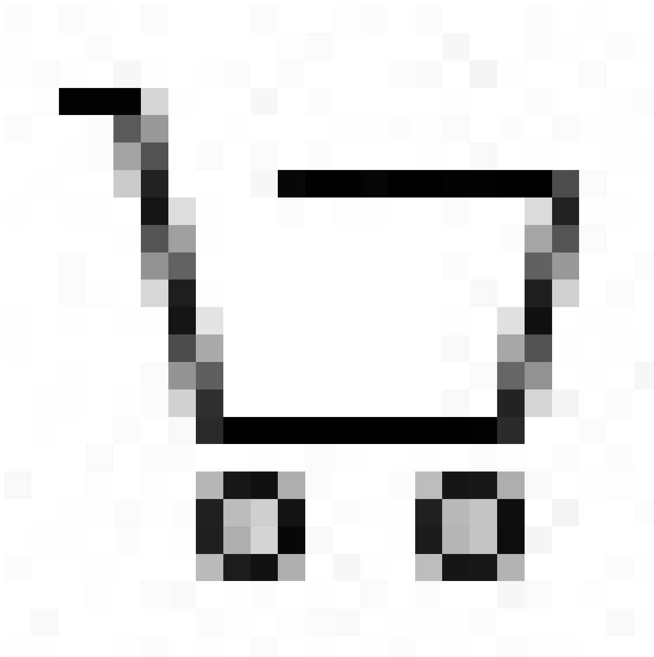


Cartoon by Olivia de Recat

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When Corona started on Wegovy, the side effects were awful—fatigue, nausea, months of severe insomnia. She joined a Facebook support group, where members counselled her that foods that were processed, fried, or high in carbohydrates or sugar tended to make people on GLP-1 medications feel sick. Corona told me, “If I tried to eat a whole burrito bowl at Chipotle, I would feel so physically ill I would have to call off work.” She could no longer handle alcohol, and had little desire to drink it, another common side effect. “One day we went out to a brewery and I had three beers in four hours, and I was throwing up afterward, as drunk as if I’d had a whole keg,” she said. “I decided to never have beer again.” (Anecdotally, doctors and patients have reported that these medications can decrease a range of dopamine-seeking behaviors, including online shopping.) She started hiking and running, which she hadn’t been able to do when she was heavier; she went to the gym every day, first thing in the morning. At the time we spoke, she had been taking Wegovy for a year, and had lost fifty pounds. She told me she felt like an entirely different person, energized and strong.

“Let’s be honest,” she said. “I was not healthy at over two hundred and twenty pounds, being five-four.” She needed something to get her back to a state of equilibrium, and semaglutide appears to have done it. “If we get past this as a celebrity-weight-loss headline story, and we see this for what it

really is, it's revolutionary," she said. "In the future it might be like taking vitamins. Everyone's going to be on it."

This past November, I created an account on a telehealth Web site that looked as though it had been designed in about forty-five minutes using stock images and a free template. I filled out a form that asked for my height, my weight, and my reason for wanting semaglutide. I entered a weight that gave me a B.M.I. of 30. This was a lie, and I expected to be caught out during the Zoom appointment that I assumed was coming. Instead, a nurse practitioner named Nicole sent me a direct message laced with cheerful emojis. "My extensive experience allows me to provide a very wide range of services to you," she said, adding prayer hands. She warned me that it was hard to get Ozempic covered by insurance; I replied that I would be happy to pay out of pocket.

"My patients, YOU, are suffering," she wrote back. She said that she could connect me with a compounding pharmacy to get me three months' worth of low-cost semaglutide. "This NEW alternate option I am providing is for ALL patients, even those with stubborn insurance, no insurance, or government insurance," she wrote. It would cost two hundred and fifty dollars, and the fee for my "visit" would be a hundred and fifty dollars. She thanked me for my patience "during this time when it is very difficult to obtain weight loss assistance." I asked if she would help me manage the side effects, but got no reply. I wrote again and asked to move forward with the prescription.

A few days later, I received a small cardboard box from Clearwater, Florida, in the mail. Inside was a baggie containing alcohol pads, orange-tipped single-use insulin syringes, and a vial of bacteriostatic water. Another baggie contained a two-inch vial of clear liquid—this was the semaglutide—plus a syringe with an alarmingly long needle and a single sheet of instructions for how to mix the semaglutide with the bacteriostatic water and inject myself.

The over-all vibe of this package did not inspire confidence. (Semaglutide is supposed to come in temperature-controlled packaging, and it did not.) Still, when I told people about my semaglutide stash, they were intrigued. "Should I take it and be your guinea pig?" a friend asked. I reminded him

that he was already skinny. "I'm Gigi Hadid skinny," he replied. "I could be Bella Hadid skinny." He was kidding, sort of.

I became curious whether I could get a prescription without lying about my weight. I found the Web site of a telehealth clinic advertising semaglutide, and, this time, entered my real height and weight, that of a woman who wears a size 4. A practitioner called me the next morning; I told him that I'd had a baby in 2020 and wanted to lose fifteen pounds. "Our program is meant for this exact kind of case," he said. He discussed side effects—"the only one to really be worried about is mild nausea"—and told me that I wouldn't need to do any blood work or visit a doctor. "It's very mild, it's a peptide," he said. "It just balances everything out."

Novo Nordisk has patented semaglutide, and the company has insisted that it does not sell the medication for compounding purposes, which raises the question of what compounding pharmacies are providing to their customers. These pharmacies have to comply with regulations set by state pharmacy boards and the F.D.A., and they are required to source ingredients from F.D.A.-registered suppliers, but the F.D.A. does not approve or verify compounded drugs, and the pharmacies—there are about seventy-five hundred in the United States—are primarily monitored through inspections. The rules that govern them are, a prominent figure in the compounding industry told me, "under-enforced."

I wrote to the telehealth clinic and asked to be put in touch with its pharmacy. A co-owner of the clinic called me a few minutes later. He said that the pharmacy they used, which is also based in Florida, was selling semaglutide sodium—the salt form of the drug molecule, which is easily obtainable for bulk purchase online as a research chemical. Most drugs can be prepared in different chemical formulations, but the F.D.A. requires clinical studies of each formulation to prove safety and efficacy, and it has not approved semaglutide sodium for compounding. The Alliance for Pharmacy Compounding has suggested that semaglutide sodium "should not be used for human compounding," and is "not a substitute for semaglutide base." But the clinic owner insisted that, for the purposes of weight loss, semaglutide sodium was "the same thing," and that the business with the F.D.A. was just politics. "Ozempic is so expensive here because our health-care system is capitalistic," he said. "In socialistic health-care systems, in

Europe, you can get a month's supply for a hundred and fifty dollars." (This is not far off—it costs about two hundred dollars in the United Kingdom.) He assured me that I could trust the Florida pharmacy and its products: it was, he claimed, where all the Hollywood celebrities got their stuff. He also said that semaglutide sodium was in such high demand that the pharmacy was testing semaglutide acetate, which hasn't been approved for compounding by the F.D.A., either.

I asked the prominent figure from the compounding industry about the legality of compounding pharmacies using semaglutide sodium. He described it as a "gray area." "When you dissolve semaglutide sodium in water, you end up with semaglutide base and sodium ions," he said. He also insisted that "the F.D.A. knows this is going on, and they haven't said a word."

Eli Lilly and Novo Nordisk together have at least twelve more obesity medications in development. Novo Nordisk reportedly spent about a hundred million dollars advertising Ozempic last year, and the two companies are spending roughly ten million dollars annually on lobbying. A primary focus of that lobbying is the proposed Treat and Reduce Obesity Act, which has been introduced in congressional sessions annually since 2012, and which would require Medicare to cover, among other treatments, chronic-weight-management drugs. Anticipating the passage of this bill within the next few years, Morgan Stanley has forecast that U.S. revenue from such drugs will increase four-hundredfold by the end of the decade. Obesity looks "set to become the next blockbuster pharma category," it declared, in a report last year, which also predicted that social media and word of mouth will create an "exponential virtuous cycle" around the new medications: a quarter of people with obesity will seek treatment from physicians, up from the current seven per cent, and more than half of those who do will begin taking medicine. In March, WeightWatchers acquired the telehealth weight-loss company Sequence, which specializes in prescribing GLP-1 drugs.

Controversially, the American Pediatric Association recently included weight-loss medication and bariatric surgery as part of a set of treatments that physicians should consider for kids with obesity. (Bariatric surgery, previously the only medical intervention that resulted in lasting weight loss

for more than a small percentage of people, works in part because it, too, increases GLP-1 levels, and does so before any weight loss has occurred.) In clinical trials, patients who go off GLP-1 drugs regain much of their lost weight within a year. I asked Dr. Aronne, from Weill Cornell, about the possible medical consequences of irregular lifetime use, which seems to be a likely outcome for many patients, especially those who are prescribed the drugs at an early age. “That’s a great question,” he said, “and we don’t have the answer.” He suggested that doctors might begin treating obesity the way they treat hypertension. “You could start people on a tiny dose per week, and they would never get to the place where they have catastrophic problems,” he said. Patients would still need regular blood work and other monitoring; it’s likely enough that, as these drugs come into use in a wider patient population than ever before, new risks and complications will arise. But to Aronne, who has treated patients with serious health complications related to weight for thirty years, a lifetime on Wegovy seems far less dangerous than a lifetime of severe obesity.

I had been wondering, I told Aronne, about the extent to which the excitement around this new class of drugs took the broader status quo more or less for granted. Many obesity-related health problems are worsened by circumstances that could be helped through policy—by raising the minimum wage high enough for people to afford fresh produce and high-quality protein, by investing in housing and community spaces that are conducive to recreation, by ending the billions of dollars in farm subsidies that go to junk-food additives, such as high-fructose corn syrup. “These things would work to prevent obesity, not treat it,” Aronne said. “It would be like trying to treat lung cancer through a smoking-cessation program.” This was the point I was trying to make—that we have an individual solution, but we need collective ones, too.

Omari, the Instagram-famous dietitian, is now off her compounded semaglutide, which she’d taken to shed some pandemic pounds. She was optimistic that she’d be able to maintain her weight, as she’d generally been able to do before. But, as I kept reminding Ozempic-curious friends, these medications were designed for chronic conditions, obesity and diabetes. For people who are dealing with those conditions, Ozempic appears to create a path toward a healthy relationship to food. For those who aren’t, it might function more like an injectable eating disorder. As the side effects make

clear, it’s not a casual thing to drastically alter your body’s metabolic process, and there is no large-scale data about the safety of these drugs when taken by people who are mainly interested in treating another chronic condition, the desire to be thin.

Once Ozempic is off the shortage list, compounding pharmacies will no longer be allowed to sell semaglutide, but that doesn’t necessarily mean they’ll stop: the pharmacy in Clearwater that supplied my stash told me that they’d sold semaglutide before the shortage and would continue to do so after it ended. Jonathan Kaplan, who oversees the weight-loss program at Pacific Heights Plastic Surgery, in San Francisco, told me that he saw a “glimmer of hope” in tirzepatide, the active ingredient in Mounjaro: that drug is on the shortage list, too, and compounding pharmacies were already gearing up to sell it. In the meantime, Pacific Heights, which prescribes compounded semaglutide to patients who meet the medical criteria, and also provides blood-work monitoring and life-style coaching, has warned the members of its mailing list that compounded semaglutide may soon become unavailable. “You may want to join our program now so that we can reserve a 6-month supply of the medication for you,” the clinic added.

Kaplan, a plastic surgeon, is better known on TikTok as @RealDrBae—in his videos, he wears navy scrubs monogrammed “*DR BAE*” and talks to the camera as though it’s his partner in an absorbing conversation at an airport bar. He believes that more people—a lot more people—are going to start taking GLP-1 drugs soon. He didn’t have in mind thin people who want to be thinner, he added; he was thinking about fat people who had been struggling with discomfort, with inconvenience, with social pressure all their lives, who might have lately felt encouraged to try to accept their heavier weight. He predicted that the Ozempic era would put an end to all that. “They’re no longer going to accept that they should just be happy with the body they have,” he said. ♦

By Hanif Abdurraqib

By Sheelah Kolhatkar

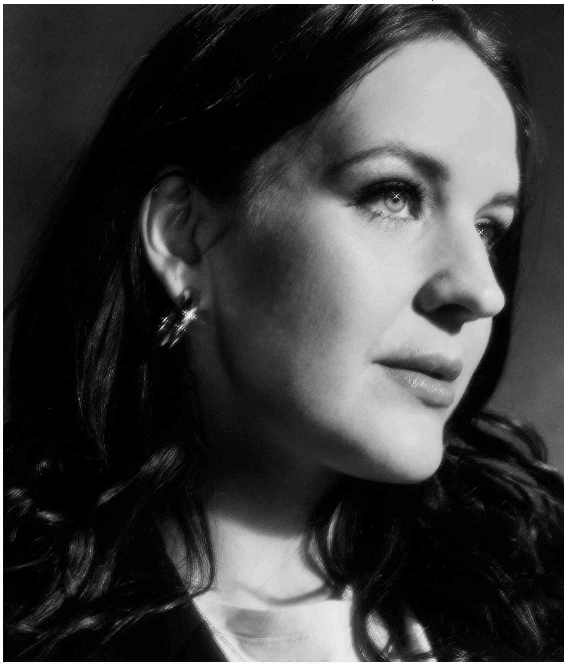
By Adam Gopnik

Classical Music

- **Lise Davidsen, the Real Deal**

Lise Davidsen, the Real Deal

The dramatic soprano makes her role début as the Marschallin in Richard Strauss's "Der Rosenkavalier," at the Metropolitan Opera.



Scattered whispers that the dramatic Norwegian soprano Lise Davidsen is the real deal have grown into a roar of consensus almost as powerful as her molten high notes. But Davidsen is still building her repertoire intentionally on the international stage; she makes her role début as the Marschallin in Richard Strauss's **"Der Rosenkavalier,"** at the Metropolitan Opera, on March 27. It's a relatively subtle assignment that derives meaning from intimacy, leading to the part's big payoff, in the final trio, which closes the opera in a fit of rapture.

By Richard Brody

By Oussama Zahr

By Jay Ruttenberg

By Hanif Abdurraqib

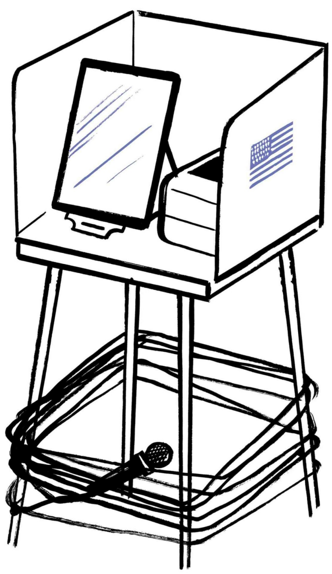
Comment

- Where Dominion v. Fox Could Lead

Where Dominion v. Fox Could Lead

The case may have profound implications not only for the two companies but also for the legal framework in which the media operate.

By Amy Davidson Sorkin



Contested elections can have unexpected legacies. After the recount of the 2000 Presidential election results in Palm Beach County, Florida, a Canadian electrical engineer named John Poulos was struck, like most people, by what a mess it was. These were the days of the so-called Brooks Brothers riot and a Supreme Court fight that awarded Florida's electoral votes to George W. Bush. Poulos was unimpressed by the voting technology, which featured poorly designed punch-card ballots that yielded hanging and dimpled chads, and overcounts and undercounts. During the next couple of years, he worked on building a better voting machine. He founded a company and, looking for a name, turned to the Dominion Elections Act of 1920, which had enfranchised many Canadian women. "We thought that would be a nice homage to helping voters vote," he told *Fortune*.

Dominion Voting Systems is now reaching a decisive stage in a defamation lawsuit it has filed against Fox News and its parent, Fox Corporation, whose chairman is Rupert Murdoch. Dominion has asked for compensatory

damages of as much as $1.6 billion—a figure that may change—saying that Fox and its on-air personalities promoted an “inherently improbable and demonstrably false preconceived narrative” that it had been involved in a grand scheme to rig the 2020 Presidential election. A Delaware Superior Court judge, Eric Davis, will hear arguments for summary judgment this week. If the case moves forward, a trial should begin in April. In many ways, it’s puzzling that Fox has allowed the case to proceed this far. The evidence that has been made public in pre-trial filings, including internal texts and e-mails, could hurt its standing with almost every imaginable constituency, including its core audience. In one text, the host Tucker Carlson said of Donald Trump, “I hate him passionately.”

What has kept Fox hurtling forward is, by its own account, the belief that the law is on its side, and that the standard for defamation laid out in the 1964 Supreme Court ruling in New York Times Co. v. Sullivan protects it. Sullivan requires a showing of “actual malice,” meaning that a statement was made “with knowledge that it was false or with reckless disregard of whether it was false or not,” in cases brought by public officials, which the Court later extended to public figures. Fox’s assertion comes at a moment when Sullivan is under attack, particularly from the right, adding an ironic dimension to Fox’s reliance on it. (Justice Clarence Thomas has long expressed unhappiness with the standard.) As a result, Dominion v. Fox may have profound implications not only for the two companies but also for the legal framework in which the media operate.

Among the stories that Dominion says Fox promoted was that the company was actually the brainchild of associates of Hugo Chávez—Venezuela’s demagogic leftist President, who died in 2013—and was built to steal elections. The “Venezuela lie,” as the suit refers to it, involved cash being funnelled to Dominion from Cuba and China, so that its machines could deny Trump the White House. Dominion protested that it had no ties to Venezuela; in fact, its majority owner is Staple Street Capital, an American private-equity firm. But Fox guests, notably Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell, a Trump lawyer, kept repeating the theories as various hosts, the lawsuit argues, encouraged and even parroted them. Maria Bartiromo spoke about “the Venezuela connection.”

The panic on Fox News about Dominion, in other words, wasn't just about worries that its voting machines could be vulnerable to hacking—though it highlighted that fear, too. (The company's technology does allow paper ballots to be audited.) Rather, the effect was to make Dominion appear as a deliberately malign actor. Fox also became a venue for allegations that Dominion had paid kickbacks to government officials.

It's possible to wonder whether Fox, from its central place in the Trumpist ecosystem, which was driven so much by one man's fantasies, stopped seeing Dominion as a real company, employing real people, which could hire real lawyers. But the internal communications indicate that after Fox became the first major outlet to call Arizona for Joe Biden, many at the network became focussed on the fact that it had made Trump very angry, and might be losing viewers. Murdoch was attuned to this dynamic. The spirit of the place is captured in texts from Carlson to Sean Hannity after an on-air colleague tweeted that there was no evidence of voting systems being compromised. "Please get her fired. Seriously," Carlson wrote, adding, "The stock price is down. Not a joke."

The pursuit of favor and ratings is, Dominion says, what led Fox News to Venezuela, even though people at the network knew that it was a pretty strange place to be. As the host Dana Perino put it in a message, "Where the hell did they even get this Venezuela tie to dominion? I mean wtf." The word "nuts" appears more than once in internal comments about Powell's theories, including in the phrase, from one executive, "*mind blowingly nuts*." On November 19th, Murdoch sent an e-mail with the subject line "Watching Giuliani!"; it read, "Really crazy stuff. And damaging." Murdoch has acknowledged in a deposition that he could have stepped in more but did not.

Fox's stance, basically, is that what it was doing was just journalism—reporting on "newsworthy allegations." (It also pointed to accurate reports that it had aired.) The network has said that it is protecting "the free press," and has suggested that, if it were to be held liable, so might any other outlet that reported on Trump's election complaints. In Fox's telling, Sullivan stands or falls with it. This was something of a bluff, given the evidence that Fox News may have been pretty reckless, under the existing standard. Still,

there's a risk that a loss by Fox News, if the case is eventually appealed to the Supreme Court, might indeed bring changes to the Sullivan doctrine.

But a Fox victory has the potential to be profoundly disruptive, too, because it would suggest that almost nothing could meet the actual-malice test. Such an outcome could in its own way undermine Sullivan, by making it seem meaningless—an empty promise of recourse. That result could itself push the Court to an even broader reconsideration of press freedom. Times v. Sullivan has been vital to the press's ability to bring criticisms of those with power to light. If the decision instead becomes synonymous with the idea that ordinary people can be defamed with impunity, it cannot long survive. And it is worth saving. ♦

By David Remnick

By Ian Crouch

By Evan Osnos

By Sarah Larson

Crossword

- **The Crossword: Friday, March 17, 2023**

By Tracy Gray

By Robyn Weintraub

By Brooke Husic

By Anna Shechtman

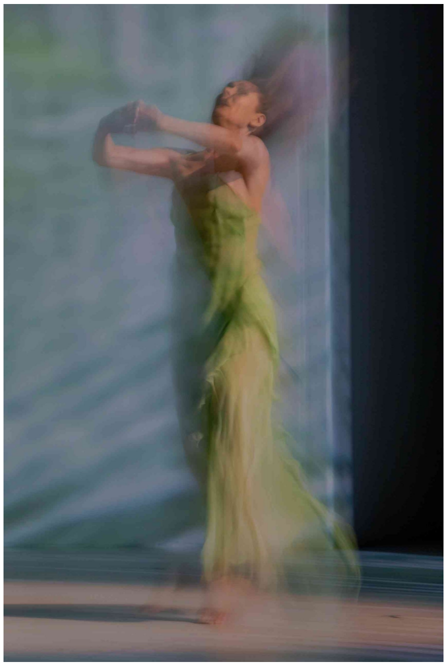
Dancing

- The Afterlife of Pina Bausch

The Afterlife of Pina Bausch

The American première of the late, legendary choreographer's "Água" shows what can be passed on to a younger generation and what can't.

By Jennifer Homans



I have always loved the dances of Pina Bausch and her company, Tanztheater Wuppertal. Their performances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where they have appeared since 1984, were her own theatre of the absurd: I remember seeing, that year, her astonishing "Rite of Spring" (1975), with the stage thickly covered in dirt and the dancers flinging their spines with a violence that was almost frightening to watch. And the melancholy "Café Müller" (1978), in which Pina herself was a fragile woman in a white nightgown who walked barefoot, eyes shut, arms faintly extended, as a man rushed to shove tables and chairs aside to save her from smashing into them. She said that she could find her way into that ghostly body only if her eyes, behind closed lids, looked down, not forward. That's how intense she was as an artist.

Over the years, her dances grew lighter—to darker effect—as she developed her method of working. Rather than "making a dance," she asked her dancers questions—"What do you do, in order to be loved?" was one—and

they responded with stories and movements from their own lives and imaginations. With them, she would elaborate, cut, compile, and integrate the material into a dance. Many of her dancers and collaborators joined her soon after her start in Wuppertal, in 1973, and stayed for decades. A whole repertory developed out of these stories, and out of these people. ("She is a vampire," one of her longtime dancers noted.)

The result was an uncanny mixture of spoken word, gesture, dance, and music. There was little plot, and her humorous and often ironic cabaret-tinged vignettes had a distinctive look: the women in spike heels and silky, lingerie-like gowns and the men in deadpan bourgeois slacks or suits. (But there was also plenty of cross-dressing, outrageous plumage, even tulle and toe shoes. "*Das ist Kalbfleisch*"—veal—one dancer proclaimed, as she stuffed meat into her toe shoe.) The dancers performed, memorably, against simple café tables, but also in a field of eight thousand (fake) pink carnations; or in the pouring rain (requiring thousands of gallons of water); or, in 1989, amid the ruins of a high wall that had cracked and fallen. Set against these theatrical elements, her formal dances, abstract and often performed barefoot in flowing materials, seemed sacrosanct—an arena of pure soul.

The feel of the work was distinctly German. Bausch was part of a generation that, in the late sixties, rejected the silence of their parents during the Nazi era and also the West German capitalist miracle that followed. Her themes were sex, memory, cruelty, and the strange habits of the human animal. Born in 1940 in Solingen, a town that was heavily bombed by the Allies, Bausch later recalled air-raid shelters and a bomb that fell on the family home; for a time, she lived with an aunt in nearby Wuppertal, where the shelter was larger. Her parents ran a small hotel and café—the source of "Café Müller" and her somnambular dance. When she was twelve, and her father fell ill, she even helped run the place, but mainly she and the neighborhood kids played make-believe in the war ruins. (She liked to pretend she was Marika Rökk, an actress sometimes known as the Nazi Ginger Rogers, who, it later turned out, was a Soviet spy.) At night, she hid under the café tables, where she could listen to adult conversations.

Some of her closest collaborators were part of this generation, too: Rolf Borzik, who designed costumes and sets and was also her partner, was born

in 1944 in Poland and grew up largely in Germany. After his death, in 1980, she brought in Peter Pabst, also born in 1944 in Poland and raised in Germany. Marion Cito, a dancer and a costume designer, was from Berlin, born in 1938. Bausch's company eventually became more diverse—at one point, there were twenty-nine dancers from seventeen countries—and this, too, was a way of breaking with Germany and its past. So was a series of co-productions with foreign cities—Istanbul, Palermo, São Paulo—which the company visited and absorbed, before fashioning new (still very German) dances out of the resulting material.

When Bausch died suddenly, of cancer, in 2009, at the age of sixty-eight, a painful drama of confusion and grief ensued. The dancers rallied and continued to perform her work, and two of her closest associates, Dominique Mercy and Robert Sturm, ran the company until 2013, when Lutz Förster, another veteran Bausch performer, took over. In 2017, Adolphe Binder was brought in to commission new dances that might fill the choreographic void that Pina had left, but this move soon failed amid recriminations and lawsuits. In 2022, the French choreographer Boris Charmatz, known for his conceptual dances, was hired to lead the troupe, but by then many of the stalwart, aging dancers had retired and been replaced by a new generation.

So the company that came to *BAM* earlier this month with the U.S. première of "Água," from 2001, was new: Pina without Pina, and Pina without Pina's dancers; only two of the dancers in Brooklyn had worked with her. "Água," which grew out of the company's visit to São Paulo, is a lush and visually spectacular work, with a musical playlist of some thirty artists, many of them iconically Brazilian (Caetano Veloso, Antônio Carlos Jobim), some not (Tom Waits). The costumes are a pageant of brightly colored gowns and richly patterned fabric. As the show begins, projections (by Pabst) onto curved walls send us rushing through palm trees; a woman stands onstage eating an orange with orgasmic delight, as she tells a man who holds a mike to her mouth about a cramp she had in her leg.

From there, we are whooshed past drummers, into rain forests, over water and onto beaches, in a dizzying tour, as the dancers drink, seduce, fight, laugh, loll on couches, play games. On the virtual beach, for example, they hold towels in front of them which are printed with naked bodies, to seemingly change sex. In another scene, an elegantly dressed woman

wearing an old boot on one foot asks a man in the audience where he is from, and when he says Indiana she kicks off the boot and as it lands declares, “You see, this means freezing. So, tomorrow, Indiana will be a freezing day!” She then goes on to the next audience member to further demonstrate this method of weather prediction. Throughout, there are plenty of full-bodied Pina-style dances with intense and spiralling motion—an escape from the escapism.

But—and it is a big but—Pina’s irony and spirit elude the dancers, and they romp through the work as if it were standup comedy or a Disney cartoon. Julie Shanahan, a company veteran still fully possessed of her Pina gait and grit as she drunkenly warns a waiter, “Do not pass the line,” looks out of place; this is no longer her world. It is a circus, kids playing around, flirting and self-satisfied, as they grinningly break the fourth wall. Even the dancing suffers from the sunny disposition of the dancers, who mistake irony for vanity and futility for fun. The result is smooth, not serrated; if Bausch was hinting at human folly and extinction, it is lost in interpretation. “Everything has to do with the person who is performing,” Pina once noted. “If that person is replaced, it becomes just a role.”

The dancers all know the problem, of course, and they are doing their best. (A dancer learning a role for one piece interviewed the man who had originated it about what he had been going through emotionally when the dance was made.) But, by the time orangutans were swinging through trees (orangutans in Brazil?) and the dancers were spitting water at one another, dwarfed against footage of Iguazú Falls, all I could see was ghosts. Ghosts of the dancers that were and of the company that was. The feel, the environment, the gestures, the voices, the time that made Pina’s work both life-giving and poised at the abyss are gone. If these young dancers have something to say, they will need their own form, not Pina Bausch’s. Her Germany is not their Germany, and dance, like history, is nontransferrable. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Dept. of Shaking

- Roger Stone Shakes a Nixonian Martini

Roger Stone Shakes a Nixonian Martini

The pardoned felon delighted true believers with tales of who shot J.F.K. and Tricky Dick's special way with an olive.

By Zach Helfand



The New York Young Republican Club traditionally has its hands full—Antifa, crime, the godless city. Two weeks ago, the group held a panel on drag queens in which a speaker declared, "This is a war. You can't rest on these demons. They're after our kids!" But that doesn't mean a conservative can't cut loose. There are galas, parties, soirées. "A by-product of the club is several romances have blossomed between members, some even leading to marriage," the *Epoch Times*, the newspaper of the Falun Gong spiritual movement, reported recently. The other day, an invitation arrived announcing the latest social, at a speakeasy in Little Italy. "Martinis with Roger Stone!" it read. The Republican operative and ex-con (Trump pardoned him in 2020) would be divulging Richard Nixon's secret recipe. It went on, "You won't want to miss the Russia vs. Ukraine burlesque dance battle." Who could argue?

Stone arrived in his Willy Wonka-goes-Ivy League look: polka-dotted suspenders, shirt with thick blue pinstripes, French cuffs. His face had a plasticky sheen. He made his way to the d.j. booth and grabbed a mike.

"This was first poured for me on Sixty-fifth Street, at former President Nixon's home," Stone said, of the Martini recipe. "That's when I first learned that it was highly probable that President Lyndon Baines Johnson had a heavy hand in the assassination of President John Kennedy." Stone continued with some words about Tucker Carlson ("a man of enormous integrity and courage") and a sweeping legal disclaimer ("Any claim, assertion, inference that I knew in advance about, participated in, or condoned any illegal act on January 6th or any other day is categorically false"). As for the Martini, he said it should be shaken vigorously enough that ice shards appear atop the glass. But what about the rest of the recipe? Further inquiry was required.

Stone headed to the bar to get shaking. Men in suits with Russian-flag lapel pins jockeyed for position. The place was packed. Luminaries circulated as best they could. Martin Shkreli, the guy known as Pharma Bro, who served time for securities fraud, posed for photos. Dasha Nekrasova and Anna Khachiyan, the kind-of socialists who host the podcast "Red Scare"—the pair were billed on the invitation as "special guests"—took the mike and shouted, "Let's go, Brandon!" Others networked. ("What do you do?" "I'm a director of operations for Congressman Santos." "Oh.")

Those who reached the bar, which was decorated with bordello lampshades, cheetah-print wallpaper, and a poster that said "*STOP NATO'S WORLD WAR*," were rewarded with a Nixon Martini. The recipe? "You soak the olives in the vermouth and you drop them straight in," Stone said. "Nothing more needed."

Had he ever had a Martini with Joe Biden? "He probably gets a pitcher and stirs," Stone said.

The mood was buoyant. The burlesque dancers burlesqued. (Who won? "We all win," a dancer in Ukrainian-flag-colored lingerie reported.) Someone put on a Biden mask and aped around. Three d.j.s, who called themselves "Chinese Spy Balloon," "Non-Non-Binary," and "Jeff," spun tunes.

Stone, done tending bar, retreated to a table on the back patio. He smoked a cigar and looked bored. Nekrasova, the podcaster, wearing a military-cut olive-drab suit, sat beside him. She shouted, “We need cigarettes! Does anyone here have a fucking cigarette?”

A club officer sitting across the table, with neatly parted hair and a silver cross necklace, leaned toward her. “I have my own traditional Catholic crew in New York,” he said. “When I read in the *Times* that there are some Catholics in Dimes Square, I went on a three-week odyssey, going to different restaurants and bars, trying to figure out: where are these people? And someone said, ‘You’re looking for Dasha.’ Apparently, I was looking for you.”

Nekrasova rolled her eyes. “I am not a traditional Catholic,” she said. “I’m a Slovak Ruthenian Greek Orth in the Byzantine rites.”

“I’ll take it!” he said.

“Francis is not the real Pope, we all know it,” Nekrasova said. “You’re not gonna get rid of the Freemasons. You’re not gonna get rid of the Jews. They infiltrated the Church a long time ago.”

“This is the worst place to have a complex theological discussion,” the man said. “But I love that I finally met you.”

“I don’t care!” Nekrasova said.

“I’m trying to be hospitable.”

“Almost everyone here is going to Hell.”

The man replied, “I can agree with that, actually.” ♦

By Harmony Holiday

By Irving Ruan

By Marlene L. Daut

By Patrick Berry

Fiction

- **“Minority Report,” by Mary Gaitskill**

Minority Report

By Mary Gaitskill



I dream often of a man I knew more than thirty years ago. When I say "knew," that is not accurate; I barely knew him at all. But my dreams of him are dreams of intimacy beyond what I usually mean by "knowing." They are erotic dreams even when they are not about sex. That sounds romantic but it is not. The dreams are terrible and disgusting. Or they are banal. I cannot explain them. Even when they are affectionate and tender, the sweetness strikes a weak note amid the dominant noise and adds to my fading impression of a bewildered pain that must, for some reason, be accepted. Sometimes I go for as long as a year without having one of these dreams and I think they are gone. And then they start again.

I am now well over fifty years old. I am alone, but I have had relationships, including a common-law marriage that just recently ended. I dreamed of him, the man from long ago, through all my previous relationships. These dreams of him—and thoughts, I have also had thoughts and memories triggered by things as random as a singer's voice or the subplot of a TV show or a movie or even a cartoon—are like a weather system passing

across the distant horizon of my outermost self, but they affect the local barometric pressure and the color of the shared sky.

I was his employee for about two months. It was my first job; I hadn't yet turned eighteen. I had looked forward to graduating from high school, but then all I did was eat lunch with my mom and lie around and watch "The Four O'Clock Movie." At five, my father would come home from work with my sister, Donna. She didn't have a car, so she had to wait for him at her job, at a state home for retarded kids, and if he saw her talking with any weird-looking "inmates" he would make fun of them in the car and she would be so mad that when they got home she would storm up the stairs and slam her door. After dinner, sometimes she and I would go for a walk and smoke pot she'd bought from somebody at the state home, and she'd talk about how mad she was, and how she wanted to get a different job, working with animals. But she liked the retarded kids, some of whom were not even retarded—they were just poor and crippled and had weird parents who'd kept them locked in a room with a television for years, until social workers found them and stuck them in the state home. There were actually two kids like that, and one of them was old enough for her to have interesting conversations with. Nobody thought he ought to be there, but nobody could get him out. Donna said that if she got another job she would still go and visit him. But she never got another job.

Mary Gaitskill on revisiting her story "Secretary."

It sounds bad, making fun of retarded people when you aren't even supposed to say the word now—like "developmentally disabled" is any better? But my father did not disrespect those people, and he never would've even pretended to make fun of a kid like that except in the car with Donna. Because he wanted her to do something besides frown and mumble "I don't know"; he wanted her to yell and show some feeling.

When my parents decided that I should go to community college to learn secretarial skills, my mother asked me if I wanted to get a liberal-arts degree, too. I said, "Why?," and she said, "To expand your horizons. To become a better secretary. Or you might even decide to do something else!" I didn't answer her and she didn't press me to, because that's how we were. Silently, I absorbed her words; they were embarrassing to me, even painful,

but at the same time powerful and beckoning: *Expand your horizons. Something else.* Just hearing her say this made it feel almost like it had already happened and I didn't have to do anything.

But I did have to do something. I enrolled in an accelerated secretarial class for the summer. I looked through the class catalogue and thought about poetry and history. But it seemed like enough just to try the secretarial classes at first, to get used to college. Besides, we had only one car and I didn't want to create a schedule that would cause too much stress. In the fall, I took two English classes and I got A's in both of them. The teacher was a good-natured man with a red, rumpled forehead, small friendly eyes, and a joyful smile. He wrote on one paper that I had "good insight" and "a way with words."

•

After Christmas, I looked for a job. The ads in the newspaper were for low-paying jobs, like file clerk or telephone solicitor or receptionist. My mother drove me to interviews for maybe a week before I found a secretarial position that didn't require experience, working for a lawyer in Westland named Ned Johnson. The office was in a small house, brick, with stiff fir trees on either side of the door and a flower box under the window. My mother waited in the car while I went to the door. Ned Johnson was there by himself. Given that he would wander my dream-mind for decades, I don't know why my memory of our first meeting is so vague, obscured by disconnected feelings that move like clouds or greasy smoke across the receding moment. He was a short, thick-bodied man with deep, shining, active eyes. I was startled by him without knowing why.

During the interview, I said weird things I wouldn't normally say. He told me that the job was dull, and I said, "I like dull work." He stared as if he were insulted, and I thought the interview was over—but instead *he* said something weird. He said, "There's something off about you. You're closed and tight, like a wall." And I just said, "I know."

When my mother asked how the interview went, I said, "I don't think he liked me." But the next day a girl called and told me he wanted to hire me. She said I could start tomorrow if it was convenient. My parents were really

happy. I remember my father smiling, holding a can of beer and some peanuts; there was something special for dessert.

The people who came into the office were odds and ends in human form: a man with a scar on his face who was suing his neighbors because their dog barked “all goddam day,” a middle-aged Black woman in mod teen clothes, an old Russian lady in a purple coat. The furniture, too, was comically mismatched, and there was too much of it for the low-ceilinged rectangular room: two cheap swollen couches faced each other before my grossly big oak desk, which itself pointlessly faced two haughty high-backed armchairs, positioned as if for an important meeting that never took place.

But I liked the strange furniture. It made the lawyer seem more human because it offset his extreme consistency, his choppy economical movements, his always shining eyes. His style of training was loud and cheerful, full of stressful encouragement. When I did something right, he would clap his hands and say, “She’s coming along!” If I made a mistake, he would say, “Slowly, slowly!” or “Just do the best you can!” It was the same voice he used to greet a client he liked, the old lady from Russia who wore the purple coat with a thick sash knotted around her crumpled waist. She was the only foreigner I had ever met and she was the only person the lawyer came out of his office to meet, instead of just buzzing me to send her in. When she was next on the list, he would open his door and say, “There’s my girlfriend!,” and she would rise and wobble toward him with fierce, caneless dignity. His attention to her made me trust him. Because there were clients that he did not like at all and he didn’t bother to hide it from me, saying things like “He is completely crazy” or “I feel sorry for her husband.” He was sincere in his likes and dislikes.

When Donna asked me how the job was, I said, “It’s O.K.” But I liked it more than that because it was so much better than school. At school, I’d had no friends, except for a girl named Sandy, and the only thing we had in common was that we both liked animals. I almost never talked, because I didn’t know how; I couldn’t understand the way other kids talked to one another. I felt afraid all the time. I was afraid of saying something wrong, and I was afraid of being mocked or bullied the way I had been in elementary school.

What was strange about this: I was good with words. I was in honors English and history because I could write papers. But I couldn’t make my ability with written words transfer to the bewildering clash of people talking, their faces and voices coloring their words with too many expressions to respond to. My skill in English was so useless that I despised it; even my parents didn’t care that much about it.

It wasn’t like that in the lawyer’s office. His voice and his face were like traffic signals; they always said some version of the same thing. I could not have explained what the thing was but it didn’t matter: I knew what I was supposed to do. He cared about my skills. I had said weird things and he had said them back, but it didn’t interfere with the rhythm of our time together. The things he said were no different from him telling me to type a letter or find a document.

•

It was a peaceful time. In the morning I would wake up before everybody else. I would have my tea and look out the window at the world: one brick house after the next, each, like the lawyer’s office, with the same flower box under the same square window. The lawns were all the same size and shape, and all the grass was thick and incredibly green because, my father said, it was sod. The sun came up huge and red, like an alien power transforming the uniform lines of our human homes and the grid of streets and sidewalks into something stark and strange. I would feel the quiet joy of anticipation, though I did not know what it was that I anticipated.

Then it started to go wrong. Ned Johnson came out of his office one day when there was no one waiting to see him. He put one of the letters I had typed on my desk. He yelled at me that there were typing mistakes in it. He said that I had been making a lot of mistakes and I was making him look like a fool. I apologized and said I hadn’t realized. He said, “You’re going to have to do better,” and I said, “I will, Mr. Johnson.” But instead I did worse: typing mistakes, misfiled correspondence, numbers taken down wrong; I answered the phone “like a machine”—he shouted that at me in front of the old Russian lady. She looked the other way.

When I told Donna, she said, "I hope he doesn't fire you." I called Sandy. Her family had moved to Kalamazoo right after graduation and I hadn't spoken to her for months, but I didn't have anybody else to call. She said, "I don't think he's going to fire you. He sounds like he just likes to bitch." She said that her boss at 7-Eleven bitched and yelled and even threw things and you just had to wait for him to calm down. We talked about her rabbit; he had some kind of infection on his leg and she was worried.



"Nana, it's fine if those are your final words, but it's also O.K. if you want to take another stab at them."
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

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Shop

Neither Donna nor Sandy said that I should quit. That didn’t occur to me, either.

For a few days I didn't do anything wrong, and the lawyer brought in a box of Amy Joy strawberry frosted doughnuts and left them on my desk. He spoke to me in a personal way. He told me he sensed that I was a deeply good person but "complex." I was so surprised that my head turned sideways, and I felt an embarrassed smile cross my face. He said, "You just close the door and act like there's nobody home. How do you expect to do a good job like that?"

My head went back to normal. "I don't know," I said.

"Why don't you talk more? Why don't you open up?"

Nobody had ever said anything like that to me before. His body was relaxed, his face alert and *scenting*, the way an animal scents pheromones in the air with its open mouth.

I told him the truth. "I'm afraid," I said. "When I see a strong personality, I don't know how to deal with it. So I step back."

He smiled. "You shouldn't be so shy."

If I'd told Donna about this conversation she would have said, "What an asshole." I didn't want to tell her. I didn't even want to tell Sandy. His words were so clear and plain. They felt private, and I guarded them as I would any private thing. The way my head had turned to the side when he told me I was a good person—it was like he'd touched my face and gently pushed it. The expression "turning somebody's head" was real. I was astonished by that.

But the next day he was angry again. He said that I was the dumbest typist he'd ever met. Either that or I was lazy or I was making mistakes on purpose. "Is that it?" he shouted. "Are you *trying* to provoke me? Why would you do something like that?" I sat and stared at the letter he had thrust under my nose. I tried to say, "Maybe I should leave," but no words came. "What's wrong with you?" he yelled.

He told me to come into his office. It was the middle of the day, but no one was there. Still, he closed the door behind us. He told me to put the letter on

the desk. Then he told me to bend over the desk so that my face was very close to the letter. I didn't understand but I did it. He told me to read the letter out loud. I did. He started spanking me, hard. It didn't hurt at first, because of my skirt. But he did it for a long time. I read the letter until I cried. My body jerked with each blow. He kept doing it.

Now women are exposing men for doing things like this—even for doing things that, to me, look very normal compared with this. They say that a man kissed them when they did not want to be kissed, or touched their knee, or rubbed their back. I have read accounts in which the women say that they did not tell the men to stop, because they felt "frozen." Donna is very sarcastic about these women, who seem mostly to live in New York or Hollywood. My friends at the credit union, where I've worked for the past couple of years, feel the same, that those women—or girls, as we call them—are weak and spoiled and don't know how to handle men. I've never argued. But I have different feelings. Because I still don't know why I did what the lawyer said, or why I didn't stand up and leave, or why I went back the next day.

When I finally winced, he stopped striking me. I dropped my forehead onto the desk, breathing in jerks. He put his hand on my back and said, "It's all right." He patted me. "It's going to be fine. Just straighten up and type the letter again."

And I did. I went to my desk, blew my nose, and retyped the letter. I sat for a moment wondering what he wanted me to do. Finally, I went into his office and put the letter on his desk. He didn't look up. I didn't linger. When I returned to my desk, I saw that a client had come in. He was the man suing his neighbors whose dog barked. As soon as he saw me, he stood up and started in about the dog. He did not seem to realize that I had been crying. Ned Johnson came out of his office smiling, the letter in his hand. He said, "Good job."

•

When I got into the car with my mother, everything was normal. We drove past the usual stores and signs and intersections, looked at other people

sitting in their cars. I felt something rising up in me that I could not let my mother see.

When we got home, I went upstairs to take a nap, like I always did. But, instead of sleeping, I fidgeted and turned and thought about the thing that had happened. Normally, I didn't like anything related to sex. The way people had talked about it at school made it seem like something disgusting that popular kids did. Still, I tried to fit in. One day, I borrowed a pair of Donna's pants because they were tight on me and sexy. When I walked past the boys who sat on the radiator every day, they stared at me as if they'd never seen me before. One of them said, "Mother*fucker*." Like he couldn't believe it. The one time somebody tried to kiss me was at a party Donna took me to. He was a dumb drunk kid and he wouldn't leave me alone. I didn't know what to do, so I hit him. I hit him with my fist, and he stumbled back holding his face. The whole room went, "Whoa!" Somebody yelled "Psycho!," and I went outside and sat in the car until Donna came out to drive us home.

But the *thing* that had happened with the lawyer wasn't like that. When I thought about it, alone, under my covers, with my panty hose pulled down, I felt more alive than I ever had, the overpowering aliveness of something that's just burst out of its hiding place. I masturbated for the first time, wanting the "climax" I had heard about. I went fast, then slow, wanting to make it last. But there was no climax. Just this huge feeling: abnormally alive and half-dead at once. It was weird but also comforting to be having such a feeling under the ripped crazy quilt that my aunt had made for me a long time ago. There, on the dresser, was my ceramic weather poodle, permanently stuck between lavender and gray; there was my father yelling at my mother over the TV. I was still doing it when Donna pounded on the door and called "Dinner!"

It was around this time that I began to dream of the lawyer. These were mundane but also beautiful dreams. Mostly I dreamed that we were at the office, doing something ordinary. Once, I dreamed that we were walking in a field of red flowers, holding hands. Whatever we were doing was suffused with warmth, kindness, and understanding. Like the personal conversation we'd had, only better.

•

I tried hard not to make any more mistakes, and for a few weeks I didn't. He seemed to appreciate the effort; he was in a good mood, and twice I found a box of strawberry doughnuts on my desk. But then I made a formatting mistake, which he pointed out but forgave, and then two separate spelling mistakes, which made him furious. One of those times, instead of spanking me he told me to bend over his desk and look at the mistake and say "I am stupid" over and over.

Whether it happened or not, I would go home and get into bed and try to climax. I still couldn't, and I wondered if maybe people were making that part up. Donna would pound on the door and I would go down for dinner. We would eat and I would feel my distance from and closeness to my family, as if everything that mattered about me were as remote as the moon, connected to them only by a single stalk of something tough that linked me to them mindlessly and even heartlessly.

•

The last time I made a typing mistake he didn't spank me. He jerked off on me. He told me to pull my skirt up and my panty hose down. For the first time, I was afraid. I turned my head to look at him, but I couldn't see him. He said, "Are you afraid I'm going to rape you? Don't be. I'm not interested." I thought, I do not have to do this. I can walk away. But I didn't. I stayed bent over the desk as if bent by his words in the same way that his words had once turned my head. I pulled my skirt up and my panty hose down. He did it.

•

For a long time I forgot about the particulars of this. Or I just didn't think about them. Then suddenly, randomly, I remembered. I was watching a movie with Jason, the man who, with time, became my husband. It was a movie about imprisoned clairvoyants who predict murders before they happen. Sexless and obedient, the clairvoyants lay in artificial sleep, nearly submerged in pools of water, connected to a huge machine monitored by vigilant detectives. A clairvoyant would dream of a murder, and fragmented

images of violence would flicker before the detectives. Without understanding why, I began to cry silently. A clairvoyant awakened and rose out of the water, eyes eerily wide. Tears ran down my face.

It wasn't until we were in bed that night (Jason asleep, his warm back buttressing mine) that the memory came, flickering like the images of violence in the movie. I didn't see it as if from my own point of view; I didn't see the letter before me or the desk or the objects on the desk or my own hands. I saw as if I were watching a movie of the lawyer and me, viewed from behind and to the side. He and I were at the center of an active darkness, the kind that closes in just before you pass out. His back was hunched at the shoulders, his arm working furiously. There was my exposed thigh and small half butt, a piece of my shoulder, my forearm, my hidden face. Terrible deadness and aliveness.

•

I didn't go back to work the next day and he didn't call me. For days I lay in bed without sleeping, without changing my clothes, barely eating, my family like an outmoded contraption rumbling around me, familiar noises that had lost meaning happening at appointed intervals. I told my parents that I was sick, which was, in a way, true; they averted their eyes and left me alone. Together, we lumbered through weeks of pain and comfort: me helping my mother around the house; seeing to dinner while she went for last-minute groceries; walking with Donna at night; watching sitcoms with their bewildering store of understandable characters and jokes; masturbating over and over, always thinking about the *thing*.

My husband used to say, "When you're young, you think your life's a tragedy. You get old, you realize it's a comedy." That is really true. I finally talked about Ned Johnson in a support group, but the other people were disgusted when I said I thought about him and masturbated. Or maybe they were disgusted because I said that what had happened with him made me feel alive for the first time. Either way, they acted like they thought I was lying or trying to be special. Or maybe it was just the therapist who acted that way, but it felt like everybody. Later, I saw a regular therapist who thought it was transformative that I'd masturbated because it was "owning" my experience. Then I saw another one, who agreed, but thought that I'd

become "stuck" at some stage of the transformation. She wanted me to masturbate in front of her because she thought it would be completing to relive the experience with her. She said that I didn't have to be naked, that it would be O.K. to reach into my pants or under a skirt. I actually tried doing it over my pants, which sometimes works for me. But it was just too weird. Like I said: a comedy.

•

I got my last paycheck from Ned Johnson in the mail. There was a handwritten letter, on the office stationery, folded up with the check. It said that he was sorry for "what happened between us." He realized that he'd made a terrible mistake and begged me to understand. He asked me not to tell anyone. He said he would give me a great reference. He signed it "Yours." The check was for three hundred and eighty dollars, two hundred and ten more than he owed me.

It shames me to remember how I lingered over the word "Yours." But I did. I felt relief that he didn't hate me, that he'd thought about me. The odd amount of money made me feel as though he'd given me everything he could. I put the check in the bank. I made up my mind to get another job and save for an apartment; me and Donna talked about moving in together.

I was looking at the want ads again when my father stuck a news article under my nose. "Did you see what your old boss is doing?" he said. I looked. Ned Johnson was running for mayor of Westland. "What do you think about that?" My father's voice was taunting, the way it was with Donna. I said, "Nothing," and stared at the want ads. My father stood there for a long time as if he wanted to say something else. But he didn't.

Maybe a week later, I answered the phone and it was a man asking for me. He said he was Mark Charming—I remember because it was like a joke name—from *Detroit Magazine*. He said that Ned Johnson was running for public office. My mother was vacuuming two rooms over. So I felt safe saying yes, I knew. He said that he was doing a story on Ned Johnson that could affect the outcome of the election. He said that I might have relevant, *important* information that the public should know. He said that I wasn't

alone, that there were other women. He said that my privacy would be protected. The vacuum shut off. I said, “I can’t talk now,” and hung up.

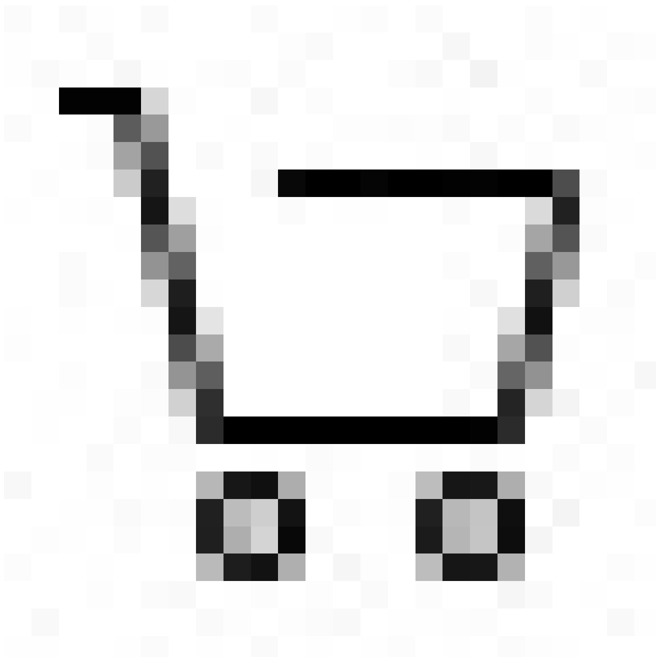


“Before I can sell you an electric car, I’m required to disclose the fact that everyone will ask you how many miles it gets before you have to recharge it.”
Cartoon by Trevor Spaulding

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All I could think was that the paralegal had told him. When I'd come out of the office, walking funny with my panty hose still down and wet stuff on my ass, Susan, the paralegal, was standing there with her mouth open. It had to have been her. Who else would it have been? Had she seen us, or did she just tell Mark Charming to call everyone who'd ever worked for Ned Johnson? What if it came on the news? We could all be eating dinner when it came on the news. I was so upset I stopped trying to climax. But it never came on the news. No women gave the public that important information. Then I wondered if maybe the whole thing had been a trick, if Mark Charming was really a friend of Ned Johnson's and I was being tested.

•

I got a job through Kelly Girl that was supposed to be temporary but went on a long time. They said that Ned Johnson's recommendation was so good they didn't know why I'd left. Me and Donna found a place on the second floor of a house in Canton. There was no washing machine there, but we could go home to do the laundry. We went in on a car.

Ned Johnson won the election. Before, I had been afraid that I would run into him at the store or just see him driving in his car; now he probably didn't go to the same stores as me, and probably his car would have tinted

windows. Now the *thing* that had happened was sealed away in an office that looked closed when I drove past.

Except that it wasn't really sealed away. Because I thought and felt differently; I looked at people differently. I didn't even realize it. But now I looked for something in their eyes and voices: a hint of the feeling I had known.

Consciously, I began to search for someone like Ned Johnson but better. Someone I could talk to and do normal things with. Donna sometimes got a newspaper from Ann Arbor with personals in it, and I would secretly read them. Most people just described their appearance and what their hobbies were, if they had pets or not, and what they thought about politics. But once or twice I saw an ad that I read over and over. One of them said, "I am tired of 'intelligent women.' I want to meet a dumb, honest woman. No phonies, please." It took me days to work up the courage to make the call, but when I finally did I was so excited my voice was a squeak. His voice was first depressed and then sounded like he couldn't believe someone had actually answered the ad. He said, "Well, you've passed the first test." I said, "Test?" And he said, "You called!" and laughed. I hung up.

Then my supervisor asked me out. He wasn't anything like Ned Johnson. He was a tall, thin guy ten years older than me but with the friendly face of a young dog. Like a friendly dog, he would walk past me on the line (light assembly) with his arms behind his back, and then, at the last second, turn his head to look at me, nodding like a boss who can afford to be nice. I was surprised that he liked me, because the last girl he'd dated (another Kelly girl) had a sleek, perfect body and a blocky, confident jaw, stylish pink eyeshadow, and complex hair. But he did like me. And I liked him, though he was the opposite of the lawyer. His body was delicate; his eyes were gentle and they let you in.

I imagined that he nodded when he walked by because he saw what I wanted, because he knew. I imagined that it would be like with the lawyer but different, with kissing and warm eyes. I thought we would do the *thing*, maybe once, maybe a bunch of times, and then, instead of jerking off on me, he would take my virginity. But it didn't happen that way. We went to a diner and then to his house. There was kissing, and he put on some music

and then he took my virginity. It was so painful I couldn't even think about the lawyer. He said he was honored to be my first. I wanted to tell him what I wanted but I couldn't see how. Still, somehow the feeling was there, in his hands, the way he guided me onto the bed, and put a pillow under me. And it was safe with him. I felt protected by his body and by his young boss face, as if he were guarding the place I disappeared into to think about Ned Johnson and, finally, on our third date, to climax, which he loved. At work the next day, he walked past me and boss-nodded as if nothing had happened. Which I loved.

For a few months we went to the diner after work and sometimes to a nice place that served mostly steak. There was a jukebox with hot-colored lights rippling between dream and nightmare, and it seemed like every time we were there someone played "Dancing in the Moonlight"—*such a fine and natural sight*. It was gentle, hopeful music. The waitress brought beautiful drinks that looked alcoholic. I thought with amazement, This is what life is supposed to be. My boss talked to me about his ex-wife; he asked me what I wanted to do. When I told him that I wanted to take classes and get a degree, he said that was great. Once, the gentle hope of the song made me cry and he held my hand.

He said he couldn't commit, because he wasn't over the divorce. But, still, when he ended it I was sick with pain. I can't remember the actual pain, because of the way your mind protects you. But I remember hardening inside. I remember thinking, I can't have love, so I should just go for the *thing*.

•

That was 1984. People were listening to artistic songs about bondage and murder and women being on fire—really, these were old songs, but they were new to me. Donna was dying her hair blue and wearing cheap leather jackets that didn't look good on her, but it didn't matter. We could still go to the bars and even dance. I was shy of dancing at first, but you didn't have to really dance; people acted like they were mentally ill and just waved their arms around and crashed into one another. Once, a guy I danced with started slapping me. I thought he really might be mentally ill, so I walked away

from him, though it made me think that perhaps I could ask normal guys to slap me.

But, when I finally asked somebody, he didn't want to do it. I was embarrassed and surprised. He'd talked so rudely right away that I was sure he would. He was ugly but also cocky, and he talked about how he hated girls who thought they were so hot. But, when I got with him and I asked him if he fantasized about punishing girls, he looked at me like I was crazy. He said no, never. I said, "*Never*?" So he thought awhile and said that once he saw a sort of porn movie with a scene where a beautiful Black woman whipped a beautiful white woman; he liked that. But he thought maybe that was just because he liked Black women especially? So I said maybe we could think about a Black woman whipping me and just concentrate on that while we were doing it. He said yes, so it kind of worked out for a little while.

Later, some men did want to do more kinky stuff, way more than Ned Johnson; one of them tied me up and gagged me and hit me hard enough to leave marks. But, no matter what they did, it was a weak imitation of the *thing*. It was never like him simply speaking and me bending.

Meanwhile, there was the rest of life. Me and Sandy kept in touch; our friendship got more real. I drove to Kalamazoo to visit her and went with her to get a new rabbit. She had a better job by then, in a medical office, and we had a good time going to a sidewalk festival. Donna met someone she really liked who worked at the state home, and I didn't want to go out by myself, so it was hard to meet guys. I answered a few personal ads but they didn't work out. A guy who came into an office where I was a temp asked me out, but that didn't work, either.

Years went by. I started taking classes at night and thought about getting an advanced degree. My mother thought I should work toward a teaching certificate. But I didn't want that. I didn't know what I wanted. I took an English class and a psychology class, which I didn't complete, for some reason. I took a history class and got an A-minus, but in a biology class my first test was a D. I was so scared of failing that I dropped it.

My mother was disappointed; she invited me over so that she and my dad could pressure me at dinner. The news was on in the background; a Supreme Court nominee was accused of saying dirty things to a woman who worked for him. I told them that Donna was planning to move in with the guy from the state home and I needed to work more hours if I wanted to keep the place on my own. My mother said that I could move back in with them if it would help me take classes. I got up and put my plate in the dishwasher. On the TV, people were still talking about the accusations, pro and con. My father said, “They want the Black man to get ahead, but look at this one, how they’re holding him back.” His tone was incredulous. My mother mildly agreed: “That’s right.”

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When I was twenty-eight, I met Jason. I was standing on a corner somewhere in Livonia, waiting for the light to change, and these two guys were there and one of them said, “She’s cute.” The other one said, “Yeah, but she looks like a bad banana. Nice outside, all bruised inside.” It didn’t occur to me that I was being insulted. I just said, “That’s true.” He said, “Yeah?” The light changed and I crossed the street. But the next day I thought about him, his voice when he said, “Yeah?” I went back to that corner a couple of times. I’d walk around, in and out of stores, or just stand on the corner, pretending to consult a piece of paper, but I never saw him.

Then fate happened. When Donna moved out, she left a box of old records in the apartment; she said that if I could sell them for her she would split the money with me. I took the box to a used-record shop, and saw him there looking through a bin. I left the records at the counter and put myself across from him, and when he looked up I said hi. I could see he didn’t recognize me, so I said, “I’m the bad banana.” Even then he didn’t know; my face flushed and so, to be nice, he shrugged and said, “You don’t look so bad.” And we stood there awkwardly, until he said, “You want to get a coffee or —?” Later, he told me he still hadn’t quite remembered who I was, but he knew he’d seen me before. He said he realized *where* right after we ordered coffee; he said he was turned on that I was blushing. He said, “You were obviously a shy person. But the way you came up to me wasn’t shy at all.”

We saw each other on and off for more than six years. During that time, Donna got married and had a baby. Even Sandy got married and had a baby. I got a perma-temp job at Ford, training people to use computers for more money than I made. A few months after I got the job, a guy holding public office in Lansing got sued for some kind of sexual misbehavior; I don't remember what it was, but there were demonstrations and protests with signs. I do remember that the guy dared his accusers to go to trial; he described how one of them had actually wanted sex with him and he'd refused her. As if embarrassed, the protesting women just went away.

Right after that came the story about Ned Johnson. I heard it in my car, while I was going home from work. Unknown to me, he'd been making a run for state senator; unknown to me, it was his second run—he'd lost the first time. This time he was favored to win, so his decision to withdraw from the race made the news. When his voice came on, I was too distracted to drive. By the time I'd pulled into a spot, he'd finished talking. "Family trouble," he'd said.

I remembered Mark Charming. I wondered. It was not on that day but maybe the next one that I drove by Ned Johnson's former law office; the lawn was overgrown and weeds were coming up through the paving stones of the walkway. There was a sign advertising drug-counselling services.

I was glad to know that at least the state had rejected him the last time he'd tried. But when I searched for him online (it was late in the nineties by then and you could do that), I saw that he was once again presiding over the city of Westland. Otherwise, most of what I found was too boring to justify the humiliating act of looking. I promised my therapist I would not do it again; it was a promise I kept for a long time.

Being with Jason helped. He drove a taxi and worked long shifts. He was very intelligent. He liked to talk about music and books. I first realized this when I turned up "Dancing in the Moonlight" on the radio and he said, "You like *that*?" And, when I said yes, he was quiet and listened. He said, "O.K. He's got interesting phrasing. And the keyboard has something cool going on." I'd never heard anybody talk that way about a song, but, more than that, I'd never seen anybody decide to listen differently to something he thought was crap.

But he drank too much and disappeared for weeks sometimes, then just showed up at my place singing some Bananarama song. He was with other women. We quarrelled and broke up, got back together, broke up. During this time, my father was hospitalized with heart failure. I got the call at work and left early; I remember the traffic was horrible. Donna was there already. She'd brought her new baby and her three-year-old. In a saccharine voice, my mother said, "And here are your grandchildren!" My father looked at the children with a deep, sad face. The three-year-old looked back, solemn and remote. I drove to the lawyer's old office late at night and just sat in the car.

•

Woven through it all, the dreams; varied scenes laid out in an endless warren of secret rooms, separated from daily life by narrow doorways and flimsy partitions. The lawyer comes to my family home to ask me out on a date. He chats with my father. Donna is on the phone in the next room. I lick his balls; he comes in a wastebasket. There is a feeling of friendly normalcy and even affection. He appears on the TV screen, talking to me about his wife; oddly, he can't remember her name, but he shows me her picture. I say, "She has a great body!" I am acting. I am in the high-school play; he appears backstage, and I kneel and bow my head while he tells me that my performance wasn't any good. I want him so much. Upstairs in my bedroom, I suck his dick and he comes explosively. But, as he's leaving, he tells me that, because I wasn't good enough, he's going to give me a bad reference. My father asks if he treated me "like shit," and I say, "No, not at all." My father says, "That's too bad—he should." The lawyer summons me to his office to express concern about how Jason is treating me. He says that I deserve better, that I am an amazing secretary. We are working together in a bizarre office where people are made to play elaborate games, which someone must eventually lose. A homely older woman loses and has to be spanked by everyone in the office. People spank her and laugh. She looks furious. The lawyer smirks and catches my eye; I look away, but am secretly aroused. The spanked older woman in my dream actually came from a real story in a national magazine. There was a picture of her looking outraged in a nice plaid business suit. She was suing the company she worked for; I don't know if she won or lost. I remember me and Jason joking about it.

•

After we'd been apart for about four years, Jason e-mailed to tell me that he was sober and had started his own taxi company. He'd thought about us and was sorry he had ruined it. He had realized that I was the most real woman he'd known. He said I'd cared more about the truth than about compliments or insults. In the same spirit, he told me something he'd kept hidden: he'd fathered a girl with another woman before he met me and had been too immature to deal with the responsibility. He was now trying to help take care of the girl, whose name was Petra.

I was moved by this. I answered him, and we saw each other. But we took it slow. I didn't meet Petra until we decided that we were really going to be together. She was thirteen by then, sombre and plain and so reserved that my dominant memories of her are all with her head down, looking away. I was nearly as reserved with her, and that was, I sensed, what made her comfortable with me.

When Petra was fourteen, Jason decided to get a place in the country so she could be in nature and see horses. He sold his company and started another taxi service, in Tecumseh, a small town about an hour away, where he bought a little house set back from the road with a huge rhododendron in the front. After a few years of driving back and forth, I left the apartment I'd lived in since 1984 to move in with him. I was able to get a job at a cleaning service and then eventually an admin position at Washtenaw Community College.

My mother asked me if I minded helping to raise someone else's child instead of having my own. But I didn't. I liked having Petra come every other weekend. I didn't try to get close to her. I let her initiate. Sometimes, when we sat on the screened porch making small talk, I felt closer to her than to my nieces.

But even Jason asked if I wanted a baby of my own. I thought about it, but the idea of having a child contradicted something basic in me—the secret life of ritual humiliation that was part of our intimacy. That was just not a place where babies came from. And although I never said it to myself, I knew: a child should not sense her mother being humiliated. She should not be born with that in the cells of her body. It was easy to be good to Petra because she had not come from my body, the nexus of the *thing*. I hinted at

this to Jason, but he didn't fully understand. Which was fine. It would only have upset him.

More than fine—it was the happiest I've ever been. Under blankets together with the wind outside. The long drives to work in winter, the radio playing as the icy morning broke, patches of church music and preachers talking in and out of sexy songs; in the spring, the gray road with its broken yellow line taking us through the ragged green, the shadows of branches passing over the windshield. The dappled horse we had for a while; Petra standing in the yard with him, her hand on his slightly swayed back; tenderness. The sun on the floor of the screened porch, the sawing motion of the ancient glider chairs. Petra's smooth brown hair and shy laughter.

But after she grew older and moved away from the area there was something missing that we couldn't recover. That was when I became aware of the pain in my heart. It woke me almost every night, a feeling of deprivation and hurt so strong it was almost physical. I sometimes woke Jason up and asked him to touch my chest, over my heart, where it hurt the most. He would, and sometimes it would help; I could feel him in my heart. But more often he was distracted and tired and fell asleep in the middle of it.



Cartoon by Sarah Akinterinwa

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It was not an ugly breakup. I was able to take my time finding an apartment back in Canton and another perma-temp position. It was sadly pleasurable to sink into my former routines, to see the same stores and sit at the same intersections, listening to the radio. I visited my mother. She'd moved out of

our house and into a complex with a sliding-glass window, good light, and soothing traffic noise from Walton Boulevard. We both went to Donna's house for Thanksgiving and Christmas. We just sat around snacking while the kids watched TV, phone fingers dancing.

Being in Canton, of course, reminded me of Ned Johnson. But I maintained my decision not to Google him.

•

I dated a little online. The best was this guy in Canada. We were both struggling with our weight and we encouraged each other. We both liked to dance, and we decided that if we lost the right number of pounds we would dance together online. And we actually did! I picked a song and practiced and wore makeup and washed my hair as if it were a date, and it was so much fun. Because I can move. I don't know how, because no one ever showed me and I almost never do it, but I can dance. He told me I was sexy. He told me next time we should do it naked. I said I wasn't sure but finally I agreed. I chose a more romantic song and practiced. I decided I would ask to keep my underwear on. But then he didn't show up. I never heard from him again.

"I'd say you dodged a bullet," Donna said. "If you'd gotten naked he could've recorded it and put it up somewhere. Probably he would've."

It was right around then that the stories about shitty men came out. I saw it first on TV, a guy being charged with raping a ton of actresses and singers. Then there was another guy just like him; another guy not quite like him but sort of like him; another guy suspiciously a *little* like him. Suddenly, in newspapers and magazines and online, there were stories of men everywhere, raping and touching and masturbating or just saying stupid, dirty things. It was like a feverish mass dream of exposure and righteous crying out "*No more!* "

At first, I felt sullen about it. I didn't even know why. It just felt like these girls were complainers. Like they wanted to let everybody know how desirable they were, how men were always trying to kiss them or touch them or fuck them. Because, if men want you like that, it means you have value.

One night I woke up and thought, If he'd raped me I could've told people and they would respect it, or at least pretend to. Because rape you can at least understand. But he didn't rape me. He wasn't interested. He said so. I was too worthless even for that. If I'd reported it, I would've been reporting my lack of worth.

I sat up and put my hands on my chest, quieting the pain. Except it wasn't pain—it was anger. I thought, He did this to me. It seemed outrageously simple, so simple that I was astonished I hadn't thought of it before, so simple that my mind veered away from it. I thought, I don't want to give him that much power. Then I thought, But it wasn't me who gave it.

In the morning, the anger, like the pain, was far away and vague.

Secretly, I came over to the side of the women who didn't want to accept or tolerate any more. But it was too late for me, and not just because of being old. The *thing* was inside me and I couldn't make it go away without making myself go away.

But I wondered. I wondered about Mark Charming from *Detroit Magazine*. I had remembered his name all these years. The man who had called me so long ago to see if I could reveal "important information" about Ned Johnson. I decided I would call him. It took a few days, because I felt that, once I made that call, I would set something in motion, something potentially awful. But, when I did call, the person who answered the phone told me that there was no one at the magazine with that name. I said O.K. and hung up. Then I called back. I asked if there was someone to whom I could report a story about sexual assault in the workplace. They put me through to the voice mail of a warm-voiced woman named Clarice. While I was waiting to leave the message, I heard (in my head) the voice of the lawyer telling me that I was a deeply good person. But "complex." Too much feeling rushed through me; the message I left after the beep was so unclear that I didn't think Clarice would call me back.

Feelings of fear, yes. Deep, amazed fear of this person who had been able to reach inside me and activate a *thing* I had not even known was there, this person who had also activated an entire city to vote him into office, and then the entire state to consider him as a congressman. Fear complicated with

incredulity—*this* person?—and anger and arousal. Yes, I was aroused. Not enough to masturbate. But enough to Google him for the first time in years.

Naturally, a lot of people named Ned Johnson came up at first. I had to type in “Mayor of Westland” to find an archived newspaper story that mentioned that he’d been the mayor of that rathole before making an unsuccessful run for Congress; the subject of the article was his surprising withdrawal from a second run, when he was ahead in the polls. Otherwise, it was almost as if he’d been erased. And then I saw it: a notice for Ned Johnson, Esq., attorney at law. I felt an eerie tingle; the address of his office was actually the same as it had been.

I was looking at the address and the Google Maps picture (there were flowers in the window boxes now, ragged purple and blurred orange) when Clarice returned my call. She asked if I had called her office about a case of sexual assault; she said that I had not left my name. I said I guessed I was pretty nervous.

Clarice understood. “When did it happen?” she asked. When I told her, she was silent for a beat too long; she asked how old I was. I told her my age at the time; I felt her interest return. I told her that it was my employer at my first job; I told her that he’d later become mayor of Westland. I could hear her fingers Googling. Her voice was wonderful, taut with restraint, bright and honed as she drew a hard bead. “Can you tell me what happened?”

I couldn’t. I tried. I used the words I had read: inappropriate touching. Assault. Masturbating. Verbal abuse. It was all the truth. But it did not describe it. I did not say what he actually did. I left out the *thing*. My voice was halting and high; it did not sound like me. She asked if there was penetration. I said no. She asked if I had told anyone at the time. I said a reporter had called me when he ran for office but I had not told him. She said hmm, she did not know a Mark Charming; he must’ve left some time ago. She asked if there were any possible witnesses. I said no, because I had forgotten about maybe Susan. She said she believed me but, without penetration, it could not be considered sexual assault in the first degree and the statute of limitations for second or third had passed. I had not thought of that. I said that Mark Charming had mentioned other women; I said that if he was calling me without even knowing what had happened to me probably

something worse had happened with the other women. I said that back in the nineties, when that sex scandal happened in Lansing? Ned Johnson wasn't the one accused, it was someone else, a politician, but immediately afterward Ned Johnson had withdrawn from a congressional race, even though he'd been ahead in the polls, and I'd thought maybe he was hiding something? She was silent for a long moment. When she spoke, her voice was very kind. She said that she was interested but what I'd said was not enough to go on. I was welcome to call her again. And she was going to dig around about Mark Charming.

My voice, when I said thank you and goodbye, was alien and repellent. But it was strong and clear when I said to my empty room, "How absurd!" I even laughed. "All of it, stupid, absurd!" I looked at the phone number for Ned Johnson, Esq. I didn't even have to think. I punched it in. The lady who answered sounded like a thousand other ladies who answer. I said I wanted to discuss what action I might take against my neighbor whose dog barked all goddam day. She recommended small claims. I said I'd already tried that. I got the appointment, the last one of the day. I gave my name as Deborah Doe, not Debby Roe.

•

I left work two hours early in order to make it, this long-delayed assignation at the central destination on my invisible map. Finally, I was making a beeline. I was wearing my best work outfit—my light-gray skirt-suit and a new blouse, mauve with scalloped details at the collar and cuffs. It was a nice day. The traffic lights all coöperated with me. If my heart was pounding, I did not feel it.

The parking lot was the same small, thinly gravelled area behind the house; mine became the only car in it. I wondered if I would see the same crazy furniture, which, it just occurred to me, could've come from the Salvation Army. The doorknob stuck and I had to fight it, causing me to burst in. The standard older woman behind the standard desk was not startled. She said, "Ms. Doe?," and I answered, "Yes."

The furniture all matched and even looked high-endish. There were basic framed pictures on the walls. The secretary was tough, efficient, and servile;

I wondered how long she'd been with him. She spoke into the intercom; she told me he would be with me in a moment.

He opened the door, hand extended. His face: the deep lines in his forehead and cheeks had a look of violence about them, more like wounds than like the marks of age. His eyes, blank and fierce, peered from under thick folds of heavy, purpled skin. The patches of discoloration on his skin made him look almost as though he'd been beaten. I did not take his offered hand; unoffended, he retracted it. "Come in," he said. "Sit down."

I took a few steps in and said, "I prefer to stand."

"All right," he said affably. "I'll stand with you."

We faced each other, he leaning against his desk. I had not taken his aging into account. While he was standing, his full diminishment was apparent—the paunch, the shrunken chest and shoulders, stiffened as if in preparation for blows. I had forgotten that he would be over seventy.

"So," he said. "Tell me about this dog."

"It barks all day and sometimes at night," I said without conviction. "It wakes me up."

"And you've spoken to the owner?"

"Yes, I think he may be abusing"—my voice caught on the word—"abusing it. I know—does this seem strange? Has anyone ever come to you with anything like this?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I don't remember very well, but, yes, I believe there was . . . something." He looked down, as if in thought.

Softly I said, "Do you remember?"

He looked up and there it was, the beam of his ruthless animal attention. He fixed me with it. I fixed back. He straightened up and went to sit behind his desk. I went farther into the room. He leaned back in his chair and said, very coldly, "Tell me what you mean to say."

“So you remember?”

“Remember what?” Genuinely irritable, reflexively curious. “The dog case?”

“Debby Roe. Do you remember that name?” I paused. “Do you remember me?”

His lips parted, and then surprise dawned on his old, beat-up face; warmth lit his receded eyes. “*Debby*? The girl who came with her mother?” He relaxed and sat forward, smiling—*smiling*—for a long, pleased moment. “You’re much changed,” he said.

“So are you,” I said, sharply.

“I didn’t recognize you. But I remember you. How’ve you been?”



Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

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Shop

I didn’t know what to say. I just stood there. Like I had so long ago.

“Are you married? Kids?”

“Yes,” I said. “Or I was for a while. And . . . I raised his daughter from a previous marriage. Or I helped.”

He nodded vigorously. “Similar. Married, past tense. No kids. I wanted them, but she couldn’t. That, really, that broke us up. That and something else that might not surprise *you*.”

“Nothing would surprise me,” I said flatly.

He laughed and pointed playfully at me. “I always knew you had a dry sense of humor!” He came back out from behind the desk and casually sat on it with one hip. He indicated a chair. “Come on, sit down!”

I did. I sat down in his reality as if I’d never left it.

“I don’t think you came here about a dog.” He paused; I shook my head. “So why did you come?”

“Guess,” I said.

“I hope not to shoot me.” (Smiling.)

“Why would I do that?” (Not smiling.)

For the first time, he looked uncomfortable. “Listen,” he said. “I don’t want to play games.” He stood up straight. “I understand how inappropriate I was, especially to you. I even knew that at the time, you were so young, so—” He began to pace, walking past me to the window and back. “And there were others I overstepped with, much worse than with you. And I was *punished*. I mean, punished. The secretary after you—she was some years after you, I was married by then—God! That wrecked my life, my marriage, finally everything. I lost my standing, my career. I’m lucky I’m not *cancelled*, because, believe me, I have to work. All my money was spent—”

“On paying people off?”

His shoulders sagged. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, Debby, that was some of it.” He took a few steps closer and looked at me intensely. “Listen. I told you I was

sorry at the time, and I meant it. I mean it now. It may not matter, but you were the only one I felt that way about. Because you were different."

He stood and walked back to the desk and sat on it again, fully this time. He said, "I thought you were probably a virgin."

"I was."

He closed his eyes. "I knew it."

I stood. "I guess that's why you didn't want to fuck me."

He opened his eyes.

"You were too *moral* to spoil a virgin."

He frowned slightly; his hand came to his jaw. "What are you—?"

I went closer. "Or were you really just 'not interested'?"

Slowly, he took his hand from his jaw. The gleam in his eyes was filthy.

"Oh," he said. "I was interested. I was *very interested*. I just—"

I tried to kick him in the balls, but he squeezed his legs together. I hit him in the face, slapping wildly; he merely ducked his head. On his desk, I saw a heavy mug of pencils and pens; I grabbed it up, spilling the contents.

"No!" he said, grappling at my arm. "Debby, stop it!"

"Filth!" I cried. "Ugly, filthy!"

There was loud knocking on the door. When he turned toward it, I banged him in the head with the mug as hard as I could. He winced, trying to protect himself. I hit him again. The mug broke, and pieces fell to the floor.

The door opened just slightly. "Mr. Johnson, is everything all right?"

We froze in our positions. "No worries," he said to the door. "We're fine."

The door closed.

He looked at me, amazed. His head was cut where I'd hit him. I returned what was left of the mug to the desk. I said, "You knew I was a virgin and you did that sick shit?"

With his eyes, he indicated the chair. "Could you sit?"

I shook my head but stepped back a bit. He stayed where he was. The brown of his eyes was faded, ringed with cloudy gray; my pity flared and died.

"What happened was wrong, O.K.? But it wasn't just me doing something to you. You . . ." He looked down and paused. "You responded."

I didn't answer. My heart was pounding and I felt it—the sadness and bewilderment of my dreams.



"So, how much are you looking to spend?"
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn

Copy link to cartoon

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Shop

He smiled wanly. “See, that’s what I . . . that’s what makes you different. You don’t deny it. That was how I knew your innocence. That was why I respected you.”

My anger returned. I concealed it. “How many girls did you do that with?” I asked.

He frowned dismissively. “What do you mean by *that*? There was no ‘that.’ What happened . . . it was all different. Sometimes I could hold back like, thank God, I did with you. Sometimes it was . . . this is difficult to talk about.”

“Do you know Mark Charming?” I asked.

He blinked. “The gossip columnist? Sure, I knew him. He was a real pest, but he’s been dead for twenty years. Why?”

“Never mind,” I said. “It’s not important.”

I thought, in vague gray flickers, of the movie that had made me remember what happened, without at first knowing what I was remembering. I thought of the end of the movie, the would-be killers pardoned and released.

“I’ve never spoken about any of this to anyone,” he said. He was looking at me expectantly.

I looked out a window at a chain-link fence, a patch of lawn, the back of somebody’s house. The light had changed. People would be driving home now, looking forward to dinner with their families.

His intercom sounded. He reached across his desk and picked up the phone. “Finishing up here,” he told it. “Yes, that’s fine.” He hung up, went behind the desk, got his jacket off the back of the chair, and slowly put it on. He took a wadded Kleenex from a pocket and dabbed his forehead with it; he checked it for blood. “Is there anything else?” he said. “Anything you need from me?”

Idly, I wondered if he was offering me money. “No,” I said. “That’s O.K.” I stood and reached for my purse; I had dropped it on the floor at some point.

“All right,” he said. “Thanks for listening. And if you’d like to talk more—”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “That’s all.” I turned and headed for the door. I had just walked out when he came up behind me.

“Debby,” he said. “I want to know something.”

The secretary wasn’t there. We were alone. When I turned and saw his expression, I was afraid. He was old, but he was still bigger than me.

“Do you remember the first time? Do you remember the way I held your hand?”

My brows and mouth made shapes of disbelief.

“Well, not—I didn’t *hold* it, but, when I saw, at the end, that you were shaking, I put my hand over your hand. And you, you put your pinkie finger over my index. You held it there. Do you remember?”

My skin flushed. He looked at me, eyes so much sadder and softer now but still boring in, searching. As if telepathically, I heard his voice say, *Please*.

In the same way, silently, I said, *No*.

•

Quickly, I went to my car. Quickly, I left the parking lot, hands trembling, driving as though I were asleep. Because I *did* remember, and, for a long moment, past and present blurred, allowing me to feel that secret touch between us, the crux of tenderness and pain that lived in my dreams. But only for a moment. The spell had weakened and come apart.

I was halfway home when I realized that I was hungry. I headed to Meijer’s—they had a store where the A. & P. used to be—to pick up something for dinner. I thought about Clarice, at *Detroit Magazine.* I imagined her invisibly listening to my confrontation with Ned Johnson. I imagined her frowning mouth when he said that he’d covered my hand with his, and that I’d held his finger. I pulled into the Meijer’s lot. I took my phone out of my purse. I thought, if the story came out now, everybody was going to ask, “Why did you wait so long?” People would joke about it; they’d masturbate over it. And I could hardly blame them!

I smiled, sort of. Because at least I’d hit him in the head. I put my phone back in my purse. I would think on it again tomorrow. Tomorrow, the waking world would finally have its say. I got out of the car and went to get dinner. I was starving. ♦

By Deborah Treisman

By Hua Hsu

By Giles Harvey

By Max Norman

On Television

- **Donald Glover’s “Swarm” Is a Portrait of the Serial Killer as a Young Stan**

Donald Glover’s “Swarm” Is a Portrait of the Serial Killer as a Young Stan

The horror-thriller series, which Glover created with Janine Nabers, about a mega-fan’s violent devotion to a Beyoncé-like pop star, succeeds neither as satire nor as psychological study.

By Inkoo Kang



You know Ni’Jah. Every last inch of her gleams: her hair, her eyes, her teeth, the beads and paillettes that shimmer with each hip thrust or arm swing, but, most of all, her skin. She looks the way royalty should. Her pronouncements, delivered in songs and music videos, move mountains. And, as with any queen, her domestic orbit is common knowledge: the rapper husband with the capitalist hustle and the wandering eye, their twins, the gifted but hopelessly overshadowed younger sister. Ni’Jah’s popularity alone is the subject of intense debate—the masses are perpetually at war over whether she’s overrated or underappreciated—but at the edges of her public image linger other controversies: the elevator brawl, the face bite, Becky.

Yet the object of fascination in “Swarm,” Donald Glover and Janine Nabers’s new horror-thriller series, isn’t this unmistakable Beyoncé stand-in. Rather, it’s the ferocious devotion that she, or any superstar, can inspire. The show’s hook is irresistible: a Ni’Jah mega-fan named Dre (played by Dominique Fishback) stalks and kills anyone who disrespects her favorite singer. A more absurdist version of the character would’ve been right at home in Glover’s “Atlanta,” for which Nabers also wrote; that show’s final season featured a serial killer who targets the participants of a social-media dance challenge set to Soulja Boy’s 2007 hit “Crank That.” But this darker, meaner series, on Prime Video, succeeds neither as satire nor as psychological study. Give it a couple of shakes and the glitter falls right off.

Forget Ni’Jah’s songs (which is easy to do, since the show doesn’t bother making them memorable); “Swarm” ’s aural signature is the crinkle of fast-food wrappers and potato-chip bags, along with the insect-like buzz that heralds Dre’s sudden onslaughts of violence. The series opens in the dingy Houston apartment that the fantasy-prone Dre shares with her former foster sister and sole friend, Marissa (Chloe Bailey), a mall clerk and aspiring makeup artist who supports her financially. (Glover, who directs the first episode, conveys the rigid confines of Dre’s world with dimly lit interiors and jarring cuts between scenes.) As young Black girls, Dre and Marissa bonded over their love for Ni’Jah. But Marissa is ready to grow up; she’d rather spend her birthday with her boyfriend, Khalid (Damson Idris), than with Dre at a Ni’Jah concert, even if Dre opened up a new credit card to get them premium tickets. Dre’s dedication to Marissa appears childlike, but Khalid isn’t wrong when he senses from her a budding sexual curiosity—he just mistakenly believes that it’s directed at him. Before long, Dre is irrevocably cut off from the only person who cares for her. She becomes untethered—and free.

The season builds toward a morbid, tongue-in-cheek provocation: What if the female empowerment and self-actualization that Ni’Jah’s anthems champion were channelled into a calling in mass murder? (“I level up,” Ni’Jah chirps on Dre’s ringtone, the girl-boss sloganeering never not grimly funny.) By the second episode, Dre is on the road—an unavoidable prestige-TV trope these days—where she finds a sense of purpose in hunting down Internet trolls that disparage Ni’Jah. Eventually, she gets tantalizingly close to the singer herself.

Delirious and tense, the seven-part season is strongest in the early outings, when it's unclear where Dre is headed and the writers more often buck plot conventions. Those episodes also suffer less from the series' tonal messiness; we're allowed a perverse satisfaction in Dre's semi-sympathetic antiheroism. And in these initial chapters the supporting characters are more sharply drawn: a group of Tennessee strippers whose sororal overtures to Dre, the new girl at the club, backfire; a formerly obese man (Byron Bowers) who invites Dre into his home and is quickly undone by the combination of sex and junk food that she offers.

"Swarm" dangles delectables in front of its audience, too, but it seems more interested in whetting our appetites than sating them. "This is not a work of fiction," a title card announces early in most episodes, subverting the familiar legalese that concludes many TV credits. "Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, is intentional." Given this gesture toward social commentary, it's striking how little the writers—among them Malia Obama, credited as Malia Ann—have to say about the subjects they introduce. They assert no particular admiration or critique of Beyoncé, whose analogue has a distant, generic allure and is hardly differentiated from her musical peers. (At least the jokes about Queen Bey, however tame, are consistently clever.) Nor does the show provide much insight into extreme fandom, a toxic and powerful force online, which the series compares to Dre's stunted palate. Glover and Nabers may be drawing parallels between the unreliability of family units and the (swarmlike) amorphousness of any fan community, but, honestly, I'm probably reaching. Adding to the frustration is the show's inexplicable temporal setting: most of the action takes place between 2016 and 2018, perhaps because those are the years, following the release of Beyoncé's "Lemonade," when the Hive was in full force, before being supplanted in vigilance and fervor by other fan bases, like the BTS *Army*. The previous Presidential Administration wasn't that long ago, but the cultural centrality of Twitter already feels dated. The fans have pivoted to video.

The Trump-era revisit proves fruitless, and the glance backward jibes awkwardly with the freshness of the talent assembled. A feline Billie Eilish has a notable role as an amateur hypnotist hoping to recruit Dre into her hippie-twee white-girl cult, and Kiersey Clemons injects a bitchy aliveness that becomes crucial to Dre's character arc. Most delightfully, Paris Jackson

(daughter of Michael) enjoys a mischievous bit of stunt casting, playing a wannabe Thelma to Dre's Louise. But it's Fishback who reigns over the production. The actor was a fan favorite on "The Deuce," where, in her character Darlene's lowest moments, her eyes pleaded for rescue that wouldn't come. The same beseeching gaze gets complicated by a character like Dre—at once naïve and ruthless, in control yet entirely lost. As a drifter, Dre tries on a range of gender expressions, from sparkly stripper gear to a rather butch (or transmasculine) guise. Fishback carries these off with a misandrist contempt, then a boyish swagger.

But even her marvellously versatile performance can't make up for the wan character development and the tonal wobbliness that sink the series. As the body count rises, Dre becomes increasingly opaque. She is farcically reckless; en route to Bonnaroo, she drives a car with a back seat drenched in blood. (She's pulled over by a white cop who's too busy badgering her to notice that he has stumbled on a murderer.) In the most conspicuous echo of "Atlanta," an entire episode plays out as a parody of cheap true-crime TV, with a shrewd if disingenuously folksy detective (Heather Alicia Simms) retracing Dre's crime spree. If, in this show-within-a-show, the policewoman's seemingly madcap, Hot Cheetos-sprinkled theory holds up, her suspect would be one of the most prolific female serial killers ever.

Dre kills not to dominate but to defend, however improbable the need for such protection. That's a meaningful difference between her and the archetypal white male serial killer, but "Swarm" seems unwilling to grapple with the dubious milestone of Black female sociopathy it presents, tiptoeing instead around the social conditions that contributed to Dre's unstable childhood, as well as the expectations that help her elude capture. Dre's gradual descent into tragic villainy is lurching and yet not without poignancy; few scenes this year gutted me like the sequence in which she has to look away from one of her final victims, sacrificing her own potential happiness in obeisant service to a higher power. ♦

By Evan Osnos

By Susan B. Glasser

By The New Yorker

Origin Stories

- **Assembling the Oxford Dictionary of African American English**

Assembling the Oxford Dictionary of African American English

Linguists from Oxford meet to compare notes on words like “bussin” (adj.) and “do-rag” (n.).

By Alex Carp



The Oxford English Dictionary is what’s called a historical dictionary. Along with definitions, it includes evidence of a word’s origins and notes how its usage and meaning have changed over time. James Murray, the Scottish philologist who left school at fourteen and, in 1879, began to assemble what would become the O.E.D., housed some two million quotations and draft entries in a metal shed he called the Scriptorium.

Last summer, a team of linguists and lexicographers from Oxford and researchers from Harvard began a new project, the Oxford Dictionary of African American English. No Scriptorium this time, but they have been using archives, language databases, other dictionaries, slave narratives, novels, the popular press, and social media. (It’s almost certainly the first dictionary whose editors regularly consult Black Twitter.) Oxford provided nearly twelve hundred existing entries for words that may have originated in

African American English, such as “cray” (adj., 2006, “crazy. Also reduplicated as ‘cray cray’ ”) and “shade” (n., 1990, “contempt, disapproval, or disrespect, especially when expressed obliquely”). The group would be revising definitions and seeking evidence that words had appeared earlier than the O.E.D. had been able to cite. The project’s three linguists met recently to compare notes.

Among the team were Anansa Benbow and Bianca Jenkins. Benbow had produced the Black Language Podcast, about slang terms, grammar, and linguistics. (Sample episode: “Defund the Grammar Police.”) Jenkins did graduate work at the University of South Carolina that used language and syntax to identify Twitter accounts falsely purporting to be run by Black users. (“One example is what linguists call ‘habitual ‘be,’ ” Jenkins said. “Using ‘be’ to talk about actions that you do continually—‘I be doing this.’ A lot of tweets didn’t understand how that structure worked.”) They were joined by Jennifer Heinmiller, the dictionary’s executive editor and a co-author of the Dictionary of Southern Appalachian English (“doomawhichit,” n., “an object whose name is momentarily not recalled”).

First up: “do-rag” (n., “a piece of fabric tied closely around the head, originally to protect and maintain a hairstyle (especially one that is chemically processed) and later as part of an individual’s fashion”). The O.E.D. dates the word to 1964, which Benbow discovered was way too late. “We have more than enough evidence that, from the thirties to the sixties, men would use them to hold chemically processed hairdos while they slept,” she said. “I came across this article about the person who thought he ‘invented’ the do-rag, in the seventies. The father of the do-rag—he calls himself that.” She continued, laughing, “I have to be the one who says, like, ‘Sir, you didn’t invent this!’ ”

“Did you see anything that spelled it with a D-U?” Jenkins asked.

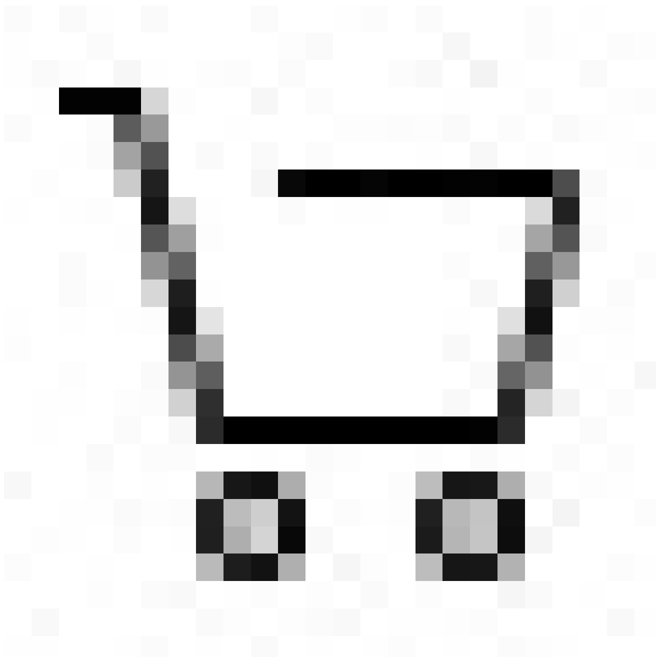


"I'm going to need you to step out of the vehicle, walk in a straight line, pose, and then walk in the other direction."
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

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“I found D-O, D-U. I found it spelled D-E-W,” Benbow said. “Like the ‘dew’ is sweat, and the point of the do-rag is to keep that out of your hair?” She sounded skeptical. “I think it makes sense for D-O to be our spelling. The ‘do’ meant ‘hairdo.’ Like, it protected your ’do and it was just a rag.”

Later, Benbow brought up “cakewalk.” All preferred a more nuanced definition than the O.E.D.’s. “They have ‘A contest in which participants compete to perform the most graceful, dignified, intricate, or amusing walk, usually to music, with a cake as the prize,’ ” Benbow said. “A big difference is beginning with enslaved Black people. I think that’s very important to the history.” The earliest evidence of the term, from around 1863, described an entertainment for plantation owners performed by Black slaves, whose movements mimicked the formal dances of white society. “There’s a debate about whether or not the enslavers knew they were being mocked,” Jenkins said.

Next: “grill” (n., “a removable or permanent dental overlay worn as a fashion statement and typically made of silver, gold, platinum, or another metal”). Some linguists have suggested that the term originated with dentists in the Caribbean and the rural South. “I think ‘grill’ is specific to fashionable use,” Benbow countered. She noted that usage of the word grew when Ludacris and members of Outkast started wearing them.

Other word origins were less clear. Jenkins brought up "bussin" (adj., "especially of food: impressive, excellent; tasty, delicious"). "Our etymology is unclear right now, but we have a few possibilities," she said. "First being that it originates from 'bursting,' and there was kind of like a phonological process happening there. And then there's also the idea that it was originally a Geechee term."

The team will present its progress later this month. They have more than two hundred draft entries, including "shout" (n., "a spiritual ritual involving a dance where participants follow one another . . . clapping their hands to accompany chanting and singing . . . and often conclud[ing] with participants experiencing a state of spiritual ecstasy"). Looking through church publications and shuttered newspapers, Benbow and her colleagues sometimes feel that their work is a conversation with the past. Other times, she said, "I'm just hoping Black people decades ago wrote this down." ♦

By Nathan Heller

By Jordi Graupera

By Leslie Jamison

By Ted Chiang

Poems

- **“Radio”**
- **“The VR”**

By **Diane di Prima**

Read by Dominique di Prima.

I think I forgot to turn
off the radio when
I left my mother's
womb

In Hasidic Judaism
it is said that before we
are born an angel
enters the womb,
strikes us on the
mouth
and we forget all
that we knew of
previous lives—
all that we know
of heaven

I think that I forgot
to forget.
I was born into two
places at once—

In one, it was chilly
lonely physical &
uncomfortable

in the other, I stayed
in the dimension of
Spirit. What I knew,
I knew.
I did not forget
Voices
The world of spirit
held me in its arms.

—Diane di Prima (1934-2020)

By Harmony Holiday

By Irving Ruan

By Marlene L. Daut

By Patrick Berry

By Jorie Graham

Read by the author.

mask is strapped on now. The rubber brace
goes round my
face then neck, they slip it on fast, it's cold, then it
snaps on. They've put
the clamp in my mouth
so I can't bite off
my own tongue
in amazement. Amazement
comes. Hello it says. Here I am. There is an arm, look, a tiny arm
on the dirt road, yes, it's dirt after all, the
road, I pick it
up, it fits in my palm,
it's coated with dust but I make out the lines of
destiny, they are cracked,
the line of fate is
curved,
trying to turn around on the field of the palm,
like a river when there were rivers
and geologic time,
the arm something that grew up fast, out of dry soil, as if it *were* soil, or once
soil and breath,
when there was myth, when there was
the fantasy of
creation,
but it's my arm &, see now, it fits back on my shoulder as
my very arm, something I
own—*you saw it*
with your very own
eyes they say, *did you not*, the row of poplars dividing my field from someone else's
stirs, & I see how the trees want to run, how they want to be barefoot, how their roots
feel bloody to them though they seem

so clean, so innocent & willing, so planted, to
us, from
here, I detect in them a terrible need for power, for action which might require
judgment, forgiveness,
we are not alone says the minister of the mask,
everyone wants to know
suffering, otherwise what is there
to remember & forget,
how cold the straps feel, they read my mind, things turn warm out of nowhere, there must be no
monotony says the voice, would you like the dust turned to mud, shall we give
the trees wings, go ahead, use your arm now,
here is another for the other side,
you might not have noticed it too was ripped off
in your prior order,
and indeed there it is, so still in the mud now,
the ring still gleaming on its finger gives it away, I could have stepped on it I say, I hear cicadas even though it is cold, how
real, how real?, we are returning to some prior place
where we will find everything as it should have been,
the evenings shall be the evenings,
the sun shall be warm but not too warm—there will be gazes in the eyes of creatures
which will be recognizable to us, not fear, not all the time hunger & fear,
there will be time for curiosity,
there will be children, and time, the creatures will not avert their eyes, the rain
will come again and we will hear it fall
on our roofs—now *they* are making rain fall, they are making a soft wind cross the field,
they have placed flowers in the crevices, and fruits in the trees,
for the time being,
for just when we are peering
in that direction,
look, the place where the chemical factory was before the world disappeared

is full of wheat, and doors seem to open
as I approach.
The strap tugs. We are still perfecting the desires
they say. Look, there's a feather on the dust I say. A bird
passed over. I can put it on now. Like
this. Look, I am wearing it, the feather. I shall plunge it in my
back, I can make it be
huge. Now it is I
who pass
over. But I am still
here. The path is filled with torn-out
feathers. It is soft. Dust rises. Are they gone. Are the minders
no longer in this
story. Am I alone here. Am I just
here
now. Look, it is the scene of
destruction I think. Something was
caught here & it
fought hard here &
lost. Where is the antagonist. Oh is it
me I think, putting my hand down now
in the down, in the piles of down, where it
fought off something like me,
just like me,
& lost.

This is drawn from "To 2040."

By Cara Blue Adams

By Parul Sehgal

By Paul Muldoon

By Lauren Oyler

Profiles

- **The Button-Pushing Impresario of Balenciaga**

By Lauren Collins

A bare white room, smelling of nothing. Nervous coughs going around like the wave. It was eleven-thirty on a Sunday morning in March—the Mass hour, Balenciaga's traditional slot on the Paris Fashion Week calendar—and editors, buyers, clients, and the odd quidnunc had gathered at the Carrousel du Louvre, a cavernous mall under the museum, to attend the presentation of the house's Fall 2023 collection. The Business of Fashion was calling it Balenciaga's "make-or-break" moment; the *Times*, "the single most fraught show of the season." The brand was trying to recover from a pair of botched ad campaigns that, in December, had led to a wild farrago of accusations, including that it had sexualized children and condoned child abuse. On each seat sat a white card bearing a message from Demna, the brand's artistic director. "In the last couple of months, I needed to seek shelter for my love affair with fashion," he wrote, explaining that he'd found solace in darts and notches, shoulder lines and armholes. He concluded, "This is why fashion to me can no longer be seen as an entertainment, but rather as the art of making clothes."

Until now, Demna had been the industry's greatest impresario. If fashion was entertainment, he was its P. T. Barnum and its Walter Benjamin, possessing a simultaneous talent for leading the spectacle and subjecting it to critique. The house of Balenciaga was founded by Cristóbal Balenciaga in 1937. Demna joined the company in 2015 and, with Cédric Charbit, the C.E.O., grew an estimated three-hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar business into a two-billion-dollar megabrand, with witty hit products such as a "Bern-lenciaga" sweatshirt, with the Balenciaga name in the style of a political-campaign logo, and platform clogs produced in collaboration with Crocs and known affectionately as "the ugliest shoe ever made." In 2022, *Time* named Demna one of the hundred most influential people. His work impressed critics as much as it delighted the masses. "He essentially knocked the craft into a new orbit," Cathy Horyn wrote in the Cut last year, when he brought haute couture back to the house after a half-century hiatus. You have been dressed by Demna, at least indirectly, if you've recently worn a clunky sneaker or a humongous coat.

Like his designs, Demna's shows were big, weird, intense, and somehow intelligent in proportion to their shock value. They were full of humor, too.

He once sent lanyard-wearing models traipsing around a blue-carpeted chamber that recalled the European Parliament. Another time, they navigated the trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange in latex bodysuits, leaving the audience to decide whether the ultimate fetish was money or sex. Mid-pandemic, while competing brands churned out pretentious short films, Demna revealed a collection on the online game Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow. Later, he persuaded the creators of "The Simpsons" to collaborate on a ten-minute short in which Homer realizes that it's almost Marge's birthday. "Dear Balun . . . Balloon . . . Baleen . . . Balenciaga-ga, I'm in a jam and need some help," he writes.

"Demna's the only one who talks about the things we're all thinking about," Alexandra Van Houtte, the founder and C.E.O. of the fashion search engine Tagwalk, told me. In his Winter 2020 show, floodwaters rose over the runway as starlings murmurated on a screen overhead, braving fire, thunder, and crashing waves. Two years later, days after the start of the war in Ukraine, Demna, who was born in Georgia in 1981, draped each chair in a blue-and-yellow T-shirt. (He dropped his last name, Gvasalia, in 2021, because he wanted to separate his personal life from his professional life and because people kept mispronouncing it.) The show featured a band of stoic, lonely figures in a dystopian arena of howling wind and driving snow. If brands like Dolce & Gabbana evoked an endless summer, Balenciaga was eternal winter, maybe nuclear. "I read the news," Demna told me. "I can't disconnect from reality and just, you know, live inside my office space." Other designers take us to the Qing dynasty or the Belle Époque, to Djuna Barnes's Left Bank flat or Talitha Getty's Marrakesh villa. Demna had been willing to take us *there*, to the juncture of a violent world and the clothes that might make us feel better while hastening its collapse.

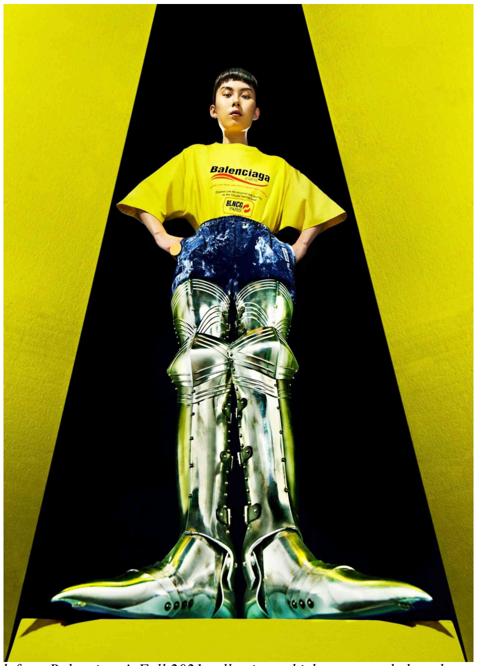
His "mud show," in October, 2022, will probably go down in fashion history as the apogee of the spectacular style of fashiontainment that he was now swearing off. The invitation came in the form of a battered wallet, stuffed with the personal effects of an Everywoman character named Natalia Antunes. They included her gym membership card, her government I.D., receipts from a vegan supermarket. The change purse was even filled with fake coins. The banality of the items offered an amusing counterpoint to luxury fashion's ever-escalating swag wars. The invitation announced that the show would be held at a convention center in the suburbs of Paris, a very

you-come-to-us venue that did nothing to discourage a caravan of livery cars.

This was my first foray into the Balenciaga universe. I was taken with the crowds of fans hanging around the parking lot, diverse in identity but unanimously committed to bladelike sunglasses, bulbous boots, and hulking outerwear in Balenciaga's famously absolute shade of black. (*Harper's Bazaar* described it in 1938 as "thick Spanish black, almost velvety, a night without stars, which makes the ordinary black seem almost grey.") The audience was hard to distinguish from the brand's employees, who were hard to separate from the bouncers, whose uniforms Demna has drawn upon in popularizing the goons-in-coats look. Whatever detractors might say about Demna's aesthetic—"trashy," "hideous," "gotdamn ridiculous"—it was authoritative. Next to Balenciaga, everything else looked uncool.

Inside, it stank. This was the effect of two hundred and seventy-five cubic metres of mud, excavated from a peat bog, that the artist Santiago Sierra had used to construct an elliptical pit. Guests found their shoes and bags splattered as they groped toward their seats in the dark. Then the music began: electronic, discordant, throbbing. (Demna's husband, Loïck Gomez, a musician known as *BFRND*, creates the soundtracks for all of Balenciaga's shows.) The models filed out, circling the dirt track like gladiators. They had artificial cuts on their foreheads or spiky prosthetics protruding from their cheeks. Others wore mouth guards that swelled their lips as though they'd just been punched in the face.

The most memorable looks were the most demotic: shrunken puffers, blasted-out jeans, a leather gown spliced from old handbags, a series of hooded sweatshirts paired with tap pants so paltry that you could almost feel the goosebumps on the models' scraggy legs. The models were not all traditionally perfect-looking, and a number were over thirty. One, a Finnish model named Minttu Vesala, carried themself with a bowed, aggressive gait that launched a TikTok parody trend known as the "Balenciaga walk." Male models schlepped lifelike dolls in chest carriers: Balenciaga in the back, BabyBjörn in the front. Totes featured sleeves that you stuck your whole arm through, fusing bag and self. "The set of this show is a metaphor for digging for truth and being down to earth," Demna wrote.



A look from Balenciaga's Fall 2021 collection, which was revealed on the online game Afterworld.Photograph by Pari Dukovic for The New Yorker

For Penny Martin, the editor-in-chief of *The Gentlewoman*, the show signified "how quickly anything cool is extracted from the underground and injected into mass culture." One commentator praised the show's "Nosferatu Modernism," while others likened it to the scene in "Zoolander" in which the poodle-tressed designer Jacobim Mugatu launches a collection called Derelicte, inspired by "the very homeless, the vagrants, the crack whores that make this wonderful city so unique." For days after, my hair and my clothes reeked of peat bog. (Balenciaga had commissioned the scent artist Sissel Tolaas to augment the mud's natural odor.) This was annoying but kind of brilliant. I read it as a commentary on the fashion-industrial complex, tainting anyone who partook.

The quiet scene at the Carrousel du Louvre was a departure from the showy worlds that Demna had excelled at building. Balenciaga had asked attendees not to disclose the show's location. In December, as the ad-campaign drama escalated, Demna had hunkered down in Zurich, where he lived until recently. He got out his sewing machine, he told reporters, and started experimenting with a stack of pants, calming his mind by busying his hands.

In our conversations before the show, Demna had expressed a subdued optimism. He saw the ad controversy as a catalyst for a change of speed but not of direction, "accelerating my evolution for the house by maybe three or

four years.” He explained that he had enjoyed igniting debates, but that the provocateur role had already begun to feel tired. “Then, from the end of last year, with everything we went through, I just woke up one morning and said, You know what, I don’t need to wait another year or two to mature as a designer,” he said. Now he was promising armholes, not sinkholes; craft, not Crocs. This was expedient, but also seemed to correspond to a genuine sense that the theatrics had started to overwhelm his work. At the mud show, you could hardly see the clothes. Demna later told a reporter that he “felt like shit” afterward.

The invitation to the Carrousel du Louvre show was a jacket pattern. You could supposedly take it to your tailor and have a Balenciaga blazer of your own. The runway was lined with ecru muslin, which fashion houses use to make prototypes. The implication was one of relative humility. No more memebait, like an eighteen-hundred-dollar calfskin sack that resembled a Hefty garbage bag, which Demna sent down the runway in 2022, saying, “I couldn’t miss an opportunity to make the most expensive trash bag in the world, because who doesn’t love a fashion scandal?” Now he was promising a move toward the basics, a fresh start on plain cotton. He told me, “I realized I don’t like being a fashion designer at all. In some other life, I was probably a seamstress.”

The music began, an austere medley of piano and guitar. First out was Eliza Douglas, a rangy, cerebral American painter who has been described as Demna’s muse. She wore a black double-breasted suit with her usual lank hair and wire-rimmed glasses. The sleeves ran past her fingertips, as is Demna’s wont. He had added long flaps to the trousers, which blurred the line between pant and skirt, swishing like a liturgical vestment as Douglas walked. More trompe-l’oeil tailoring followed—on one trench, an upside-down waistband formed the yoke. The closest Demna came to cheekiness was inflating a set of motorcycle jackets and hoodies using technology designed to keep athletes from getting injured. The engorged garments were cartoonish, humping backs and deleting necks, but they were grounded in Balenciaga’s house tradition of the voluminous silhouette. They also acknowledged vulnerability, offering protection against a world that could knock you around. (The absence of conspicuous branding accomplished this in a different manner.) A group of evening gowns, which closed the show, were uncomplicatedly gorgeous, with convex, ski-mogul shoulders.

Backstage, Demna seemed relieved. “I wanted it to be over before it even began!” he told me, wiping his brow. The show wasn’t uninhibited, or groundbreaking, but it confirmed that he could compete purely on technical prowess. “Demna did exactly what he said he was going to do,” Miren Arzalluz, the director of the Palais Galliera fashion museum, said. “He gave us the chance to concentrate on the garments.” The next day’s reviews affirmed that, for the fashion press, he remained viable in his job. The consensus was that he had played it safe, but there were hints of audacity in the presentation. In a way, he was defending his ideas and his integrity, using the same models, archetypal silhouettes, familiar prints. To reset his career, he had chosen continuity.

In the verdant yard of the “modern farmhouse” in Scottsdale, Arizona, that they share with their three children—Alessi (three) and Senna and Lux (twenty-one-month-old twins)—Arie Luyendyk, Jr., and Lauren Luyendyk filmed themselves setting fire to a pair of sneakers with a blowtorch. A popular version of Balenciaga’s best-selling Speed line of “tech-knit hybrid leisure sneakers,” which retail for more than nine hundred dollars, the shoes were sleek and white, with a sinuous foam sole. They hugged the foot like a tube sock, or a scuba boot, and were said to make wearers feel like they were walking on marshmallows.

Lauren Luyendyk held the flaming sneakers with a pair of grilling tongs as her husband doused them with accelerant. Then she dropped them into a large bin with a flick of the wrist, as though disposing of a dead rat. In a video that the couple posted on Instagram on December 1st, a manicured hand flashes a peace sign over the smoldering trash-can fire. “Bye, Balenciaga,” a woman’s voice says. One commenter applauded the couple for “taking a genuine stand against the true evil in this world.”

Previously, the Luyendyks had been noted less for their moral leadership than for having appeared on the twenty-second season of “The Bachelor,” in which Arie licked a bowling ball, said that the thing that most excited him was “excitement,” and asked another woman to marry him before dumping her on prime-time television and proposing to Lauren. The couple was angry about the ad campaigns, which Balenciaga had released weeks earlier. The first campaign, which went live on November 16th, was for Gift Shop, an assortment of holiday items. To shoot it, Balenciaga had hired Gabriele

Galimberti, an accomplished documentary photographer. Galimberti is known for projects such as "Toy Stories," which depicts children from fifty-eight countries surrounded by cherished bulldozers, building blocks, and stegosauruses. The Gift Shop ads featured kids displaying collections, but their personal playthings were replaced with Balenciaga merchandise.

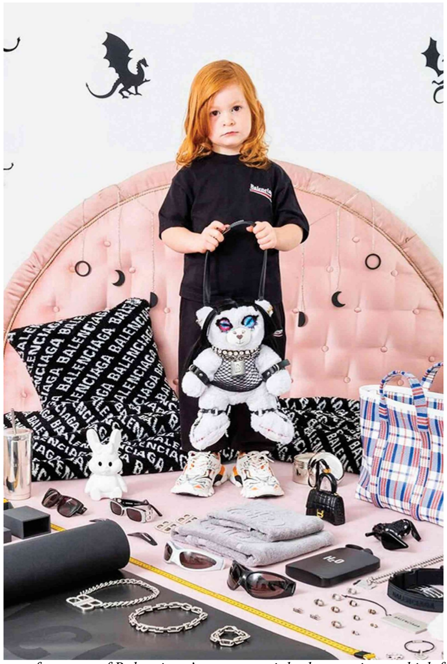
Whereas the intimacy of Galimberti's approach made sense in a documentary context, the sight of young children in fake bedrooms, surrounded by adult accessories, felt weird. In one picture, a girl stands alone in front of an open window, clutching a bag that consists of a Teddy bear clad in a leather harness, surrounded by rows of stuff: Balenciaga jewelry, Balenciaga coasters, a Balenciaga dog bowl, Balenciaga wineglasses and champagne flutes, Balenciaga candles stuck into mock Balenciaga beer cans. In another, an unsmiling child model dressed in black totes another version of the Teddy, with a padlock around its neck and a fish-net shirt. The over-all atmosphere is unsettling and even a little louche, but the images didn't provoke immediate mass outrage. "Balenciaga launched an objects line and it's an absolute need," a life-style site proclaimed. "We'll take one of everything."

On November 21st, the company unveiled a separate campaign, promoting Garde-Robe, a line of luxury basics. The ads featured celebrities such as Bella Hadid and Nicole Kidman posing in glass-encased executive offices. In one image, a black leather handbag sits on a messy desk atop a pile of printouts and manila folders. Zooming in on the documents, Internet sleuths identified a page from the United States Supreme Court's ruling in U.S. v. Williams, a 2008 case in which the plaintiff, invoking First Amendment protections, unsuccessfully argued for the reversal of a child-pornography conviction. The Twitter account @shoeØnhead, run by June Nicole Lapine, a controversial YouTuber, posted about the "very purposely poorly hidden court document about 'virtual child porn.' " Further scrutiny of the pictures' office décor turned up a book by a Belgian artist who once painted small, naked children covered with blood. In another image, a college certificate bore the name John Phillip Fisher, which viewers connected with a 2018 news article about a Michigan man of the same name who was charged with molesting his granddaughter.

Never mind the hundreds of blameless John Phillip Fishers, leading bioengineering departments or working in agriculture. Never mind that the logic of the accusations didn't really cohere—U.S. v. Williams found *against* child pornographers, not for them. For the conspiracy-minded, proximity to child-pornography-themed jurisprudence in one campaign, taken with the images of children in the other campaign, was enough to damn Balenciaga. "They're getting sloppier about their underworld," one Twitter commenter declared, adding vomit emojis for emphasis. Other social-media users sniffed out what they believed to be hidden references to the Illuminati, the Rapture, and Satanism.



A dress of spiky fake feathers sewn onto silk organza, from the fifty-first couture collection.Photograph by Pari Dukovic for The New Yorker


An image from one of Balenciaga's controversial ad campaigns, which featured child models surrounded by the brand's merchandise.

Soon, Tucker Carlson picked up the story on Fox News, introducing Balenciaga as a "so-called luxury brand" that sold "cotton sweatshirts for fifteen hundred bucks" and had just launched an abhorrent publicity campaign. "The selling point of the ads is sex with children," Carlson claimed. You could look at the pictures and see a fashion brand trying too hard to be edgy, or you could see, as Carlson did, a decadent left-wing pedophile cult linked to everything from the Jeffrey Epstein scandal to "the fact that doctors are cutting the breasts off of healthy teen-age girls." Invoking a larger American culture war over gender politics, the media attention activated practiced polemicists such as Brittany Aldean, a Trump-supporting, trans-skeptic makeup artist who is married to the country singer Jason Aldean. For her Balenciaga purge, Aldean was photographed on the loggia of her Nashville mansion, carrying transparent plastic bags filled with the brand's wares. "It's trash day," she proclaimed.

In the past, Demna had responded to criticism head on. Called out for the overwhelming whiteness of models at Balenciaga and at Vetements, the brand that he founded before starting his current job, he diversified his casting. When critics accused him of ripping off the designer Martin Margiela, he produced a Margiela-inspired collection entitled The Elephant in the Room. This time, he was slow to react. An early apology, in which Balenciaga threatened legal action against "the parties responsible for

creating the set and including unapproved items," only stoked the controversy. (Balenciaga eventually dropped a twenty-five-million-dollar lawsuit.)

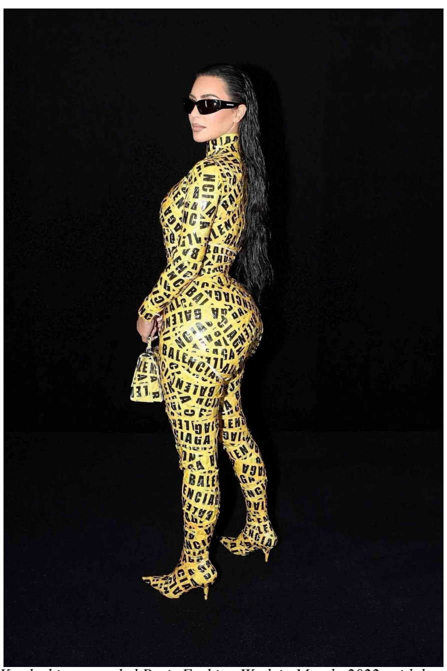
In London, someone decorated the front window of a Balenciaga boutique with a "*PAEDOPHILIA*" decal. In Beverly Hills, vandals tagged a store with stick figures of victimized children. Admirers who, weeks before, couldn't stop talking about Demna's genius were nowhere to be found. At one point, the fashion critic and writer Sophie Fontanel told me, Demna had received just two calls—"from Anna Wintour and from me." Kim Kardashian—a brand ambassador and a Balenciaga-head of such proportions that she once attended a show with her entire body wrapped in bright-yellow Balenciaga-branded packing tape—announced that she was "re-evaluating" her relationship with the house. Imran Amed, the founder and C.E.O. of The Business of Fashion, told me that the only commensurate scandals he could recall, in terms of "crisis heat," were John Galliano's antisemitic outburst of 2011 and Dolce & Gabbana's offensive foray into China in 2018.

The uproar was unprecedented, but it didn't come entirely out of nowhere. For years, Balenciaga had built its reputation on provocation. "The trash bag was really a big red button that said 'Don't push,' " Demna said, early last year. "That's exactly why I did it! Because I hate prohibitions." Many people assumed that the ads were intentionally outrageous, the latest entries in the long annals of stupid fashion stunts. (Remember Calvin Klein's suggestive rec-room ads, which caused the Justice Department to investigate the brand for child pornography, and Tom Ford's Gucci-branded pubic hair?)

Even for a brand that delighted in testing limits, Balenciaga had spent the months leading up to the ad controversy on the edge between fearlessness and foolishness. To open the mud show, Demna had chosen an unconventional model: his friend Ye, once known as Kanye West, who came clomping down the runway in a gargantuan-shouldered paramilitary look. Ye had been one of Demna's earliest and most fervent supporters from his Vetements days. Just after Demna's appointment by Kering, Balenciaga's parent company, Ye tweeted, "I'm going to steal Demna from Balenciaga," sending his reputation soaring. Ye became one of the brand's major clients, spending more than four million dollars in the course of twelve months in 2021 and 2022, according to a screenshot of his customer account that he

posted on Instagram. The men got to know each other and began a heady running dialogue that Demna once described, to the *Times*, as a "very intense creative exchange." Demna consulted on Ye's projects. Ye reportedly called himself Demna's "straight husband." One after the other, they announced their desire to be known by mononyms.

Less than forty-eight hours after opening the mud show, Ye presented his own Yeezy Season 9 collection, appearing in a shirt that said "*WHITE LIVES MATTER*." Demna and Cédric Charbit, Balenciaga's C.E.O., were in attendance. As others distanced themselves from Ye, Balenciaga remained silent about the incident. The company also said nothing when, days later, Ye posted a series of antisemitic comments. Only after Ye claimed on a podcast that George Floyd had died of a fentanyl overdose, and that "the Jewish media" was out to get him, did Balenciaga publicly back away, stating that the brand "has no longer any relationship nor any plans for future projects related to this artist." The situation exposed the riskiness of Demna's gravitation toward the most volatile parts of pop culture. It also suggested that the brand was losing focus. "I think they just got a little too cool for school," one fashion executive told me. "They went away from the clothing."



Kim Kardashian attended Paris Fashion Week in March, 2022, with her entire body wrapped in bright-yellow Balenciaga-branded packing tape.Photograph by Best Image / Backgrid

The advertising controversy, then, was one big red button too many. For years, Balenciaga had hovered near the top of the Lyst Index, a quarterly ranking of fashion brands' desirability. In the third quarter of 2022, the brand was the fourth hottest in the industry. Following the ad scandal, it dropped out of the top ten for the first time since 2017. In February, Kering released its latest earnings report, noting that Balenciaga had had a "difficult month of December." Kering does not disclose individual results for Balenciaga, classing it with a handful of other brands, which collectively experienced a four-per-cent drop in revenues in the fourth quarter. On an earnings call, François-Henri Pinault, Kering's chairman and C.E.O., said that he regretted "a clear error of judgment." Defending Demna and Charbit, he said, "We believe people have the right to make mistakes—that's important to us at Kering. Just don't make them twice."

Demna and Balenciaga have apologized repeatedly for the ad campaigns. The brand has announced a three-year partnership with the National Children's Alliance. (Charbit described the commitment as a "multimillion donation" but declined to provide a specific number, saying that he didn't want to give the impression that the brand was trying to buy its way out of trouble.) Balenciaga put forth a straightforward explanation for the odd items strewn around the Garde-Robe campaign: they were random papers, furnished by a prop-rental company, and any connection to child pornography or child abuse was unintentional and purely coincidental. (The brand has nonetheless acknowledged that it should have examined the setup more closely.) I saw a copy of an investigation that the company commissioned—its version of a January 6th report. A section on the Garde-Robe campaign could venture only a bewildered guess at the origin of the décor: it "could have been from 'Law & Order.' "

In an interview with *Vogue*, Demna explained that the Teddy-bear bags in the Gift Shop ads were meant to reference "punk and DIY culture, absolutely not BDSM." Still, he admitted that the campaign was ill-conceived. "I didn't realize how inappropriate it would be to put these objects [in the image] and still have the kid in the middle," he said. "It unfortunately was the wrong idea and a bad decision from me."



“If it doesn’t cause any kind of reaction, it just doesn’t exist,” Demna said. “That’s my biggest fear, probably.”Photograph by Laura Stevens / Redux

I asked Demna what the intended message had been. “There was no message—it was more a solution,” he said. He explained that Galimberti had been on a list of photographers he wanted to work with and that the project had seemed like a good fit, for practical reasons, since there were so many products to advertise. “For me, it was really about the composition, and the fact that we could put all these items in one image,” he said.

According to the internal report, a committee of dozens of people approved the campaign before it went out. Only one of them raised a concern, sending an e-mail that wondered whether “the juxtaposition of a little child and all the black and bats and stuff just seems a bit sinister,” but the bear bags didn’t come up for discussion.

“I didn’t see the creepy part of it,” Demna told me. “But it’s obvious now. In French, we say, ‘*Je pense tellement pas au mal que je vois pas le mal.*’ ” (“I’m so not thinking about harm that I don’t see the harm.”) He continued, “That’s why I call it a stupid mistake.”

The supposed darklord of luxury fashion is a forty-one-year-old teetotalling vegetarian who lives in fondue country with his husband and their two Chihuahuas, Cookie and Chiquita. He speaks seven languages (Georgian, German, Flemish, English, French, Italian, Russian), swears by Brené

Brown (her podcast recently taught him to name the emotions “anguish” and “awe”), and begins his mornings doing guided meditation with the Serenity app. (The dogs jump on him the second he takes off his headphones.) Other than making clothes, what he likes doing most is cooking. His specialty is *khinkali* made with plant-based beef that even his parents—who were constantly telling him as a kid that he had to eat meat to be a man—admit is O.K. He is a warm conversationalist, but describes himself as a loner, even “a loser.” (“I do have maybe two friends,” he said.) He maintains no public presence on social media. Using a finsta, he follows “eccentric old ladies” and “weird European maps.”



A lace dress from Winter 2023, Balenciaga’s first show after a pair of botched ad campaigns.Photograph by Pari Dukovic for The New Yorker

Demna was born in the Soviet Union, “that immense now nonexistent country,” he once wrote. His father, Guram, is Georgian. He was a car mechanic and a hot-rod enthusiast. His mother, Elvira, is Russian. She was a housewife. They raised Demna and his younger brother, also named Guram, in Sukhumi, a resort town on the Black Sea. Privacy, solitude, and individual possessions were scarce commodities in their home, a three-house compound that they shared with a gaggle of relatives—paternal grandmother, uncles, cousins. What was theirs was Demna’s and what was Demna’s was theirs. Demna has joked that the best-dressed member of the family was whoever got up first in the morning. He remembers the smell of ink-jet printers and glue—his tinkerer-hustler dad, in the garage, whipping

up D.I.Y. American-style T-shirts and sneakers to sell on the black market. "Obviously, you had to use elements from that part of the world," Demna said. "So instead of, like, Mickey Mouse, they would do a Russian version of it."

Demna's first object of desire was a tape measure. He wanted to cross-stitch. His parents wanted him to go outside and play soccer. As soon as he could write, he composed a letter to them, he recalled, "in which I told them that they don't understand me and they don't really love me and they don't know who I am." He is still a little sad about the way they responded to the letter. "They found it cute," he said. "And everybody laughed, and they would show it to their friends, like, 'Oh, look at this. Of course we love Demna. He doesn't see.' But it was not a very mature response. I think I had much deeper issues, and I was going through a lot of pain." He added, "It would have helped me a lot in my adult life if they reacted differently."

At school, Demna shortened his trousers so that his socks would show. The principal accused his parents of propagating capitalist values. As a member of the Young Pioneers, he had to wear a red neckerchief. This irked him: the conformity, the dorkiness. In his "first conceptually active act of fashion vandalism," he scribbled lyrics from the Soviet rock band Kino's "Blood Type" on the fabric in black marker. ("My blood type, on my sleeve / My service number, on my sleeve / Wish me luck in battle!") The fall of the Soviet Union brought a confusion of stimuli. It was hard to tell fact from fiction, the alluring from the contemptible. Demna once told a magazine, "I remember seeing a Coke can for the first time and thinking it was a nuclear bomb."

In 1992, Abkhaz separatists, backed by Russia, attacked Sukhumi. Demna, who was ten years old, spent most evenings huddling with his family in a neighbor's cellar. Eventually, a bomb hit the family's house, burning it to the ground. During a pogrom targeting ethnic Georgians in the fall of 1993, the family fled. Demna was racked by fear that they would be captured and tortured, or that his father would kill them rather than submit. They travelled nearly three hundred miles along the Caucasus Mountains—going as far as they could on foot, then waiting a week for a crowded helicopter. They finally made it to Tbilisi, where they settled.

Demna wrote in the notes to his Winter 2022 show that the conflict in Ukraine had "triggered the pain of a past trauma I have carried in me since 1993." The show began with Demna sombrely reading a poem by the Ukrainian writer Oleksandr Oles. The models, dragging their belongings, made their way through a snowstorm—accompanied by melancholy piano music and then pounding techno—never flinching as the conditions around them deteriorated. Demna had started planning the presentation months before the war began, but as a Ukraine diorama it was eerily on the mark. With Kim Kardashian, A$AP Ferg, and a Mrs. Doubtfire impersonator in attendance, the show suggested that luxury wasn't going to save anybody. It was heart-seizingly beautiful, down to the final gown's cerulean, wind-whipped train. "We live in a terrifying world, and fashion is a reflection of that," Demna once said. "If it triggers that fear or terror, then I've succeeded."

In Tbilisi, Demna wore hand-me-downs and castoffs. His parents economized by buying him clothes that would fit for several years. The oversized look suited him, anyway, as it hid the hair that started growing on his hands in adolescence. He still mostly wears T-shirts and sweatshirts, leaving the sleeves too long, in homage to his earliest stirrings of self-expression and self-defense.

Rarely has anyone explored so deeply the protective aspects of fashion—Demna's clothing can be scary, but it can also be scared. The strains in his work that some people interpret as cynical are often aching and personal. He is one of the photographer Cecil Beaton's fashion individualists, capable of imbuing "a stepladder or a wicker basket" with significance. His work makes a case that Tbilisi, Georgia—or wherever—can be more meaningful to the creative imagination than Talitha Getty.

Demna and his family moved to Düsseldorf when he was twenty-one. He has not been back to Georgia since, even though he says that he feels deeply connected to Georgian culture, which he often incorporates into his work. Vetements' Spring 2019 collection tackled his complex emotions about "family and war." A plain white shirt was covered with signatures and scribbles, recalling a high-school-graduation tradition in Georgia. A form-fitting tunic, the color of beige flesh, was overlaid with the sort of tattoos favored by post-Soviet gangsters. Each piece in the collection featured a QR

code that, when scanned, led customers to the Wikipedia entry for "Ethnic cleansing of Georgians in Abkhazia." Demna doesn't feel safe as a gay man in Georgia, where some of his family members consider him a disgrace because of his sexuality. Last year, when the mayor of Tbilisi named him an honorary citizen, a deacon of the Orthodox Church condemned the award, denouncing "the self-declared sodomite Demna Gvasalia."

In Düsseldorf, the Gvasalias spent three months in a camp for immigrants. Demna already spoke German, so he acted as the family's go-between. The experience of navigating a "hard-core" bureaucracy compounded his interest in "sociological uniforms"—the jackets, caps, armbands, boots, badges, and patches that people use to signal to their peers who is in control. The fascination perhaps began with his grandfather, a pilot with Aeroflot, and his grandmother, an airport secretary. "They really had this airport life," he recalled. *Vogue* once called Demna "the CCTV of fashion, or perhaps its all-seeing drone." He admires the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp, but there is a keen-eyed side to him that recalls the photography of August Sander, taxonomizing the daily parade. Some people were confused by an oblong pocket that Demna added to the interiors of coats, until he explained that they were a nod to partygoers he'd seen around town, fumbling to open a door while holding a bottle of wine.

By the time the Gvasalias arrived in Düsseldorf, Demna had already earned a degree in international economics from Tbilisi State University. His parents were thrilled by the possibility that he could get a job at a German bank. Demna had been told that fashion was a career for rich girls; he was a poor boy. But "the day I got my B.A. degree in economics, I knew I would never work as an economist in my life," he once wrote. "The only thing I wanted to do was making clothes and using fashion as a tool to discover and build my own identity."

Demna applied to the fashion school at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, a famously demanding program that was comparatively inexpensive. At his admission interview, someone asked him his favorite designer, and he said Dries Van Noten, because he'd just seen the name in a shopwindow. Fortunately, Van Noten was a member of the Antwerp Six, a group of pioneering designers who came out of the school in the nineteen-eighties. Demna was in. "He was a good student, but not really one that you

say, ‘Wow, *that* one!’ ” Linda Loppa, who was the head of the school for many years, told me. “He became that later, because he had an open mentality, he was curious, and he was humble.”

Students were supposed to start from sketches, but Demna worked more naturally in three dimensions, draping fabric on the body. He cared about the clothes, not their putative inspiration. Demna recalls fashion school as a formative period of “breaking needles of my cheap sewing machine from Lidl, drinking cheap red wine, chain-smoking and listening to loud music.” In his second year, he secretly entered a talent contest in Trieste, winning first prize on the strength of a collection of tailored menswear. Demna remains close with many of his classmates and teachers. When he designed Balenciaga’s fifty-first haute-couture collection, he gave his former drawing teacher Yvonne Dekock a black plissé dress modelled on one that he remembered her wearing during his student years. “He said, ‘Now you’re like before, like when I saw you in school,’ ” Dekock recalled.

After working for two years with his former professor Walter Van Beirendonck, of the Antwerp Six, Demna applied to Martin Margiela, the eponymous house founded by the Royal Academy’s most famous graduate. Since the house’s inception, in 1988, Margiela had been known for an avant-garde mentality, paired with classical technique. Martin Margiela, the man, had recently retired, and the future of the brand was unclear. Demna decided to submit his portfolio. He told the magazine *System*, “Maybe it was my economics mind, but I thought, ‘They need to open it, they need to look at it,’ because I know often in companies they get things they don’t even bother to open. I thought the packaging was important, so I put it in a pizza box from a restaurant called Don Giovanni. The CEO was called Giovanni, too. That got their attention—and it was not a fresh pizza box! I was, like, ‘Let’s just go for it.’ ”

A gimmick can be a mark of sincerity—a willingness to put oneself on the line. Demna got the job, as a member of Margiela’s design studio. He was passionate about Margiela’s legacy, but management wanted to take the brand in a new direction. “They just didn’t see the value of the right thing, unfortunately,” he said. “I couldn’t convince anyone, because I had no authority at all.”

In 2012, Demna signed on at Louis Vuitton to work as a senior designer of women's ready-to-wear collections under Marc Jacobs. The designer Julie de Libran, Demna's boss there, remembered him as talented, mature, and "super introverted." She said, "He would pass his ideas through me. He didn't want to put himself in front of Marc." Demna felt like he was biding his time, working in the fashion equivalent of a German bank. He said, "I had to do things that did not really aesthetically speak to me, so it just became a job. A very, very, very good job." He added, "I just realized, it's not enough to make me happy for me to earn well, be home at seven, and have nice holidays in Capri."



During his childhood in Tbilisi, Demna wore hand-me-downs and clothes that his parents purchased in large sizes, so that they would fit him for many years. His designs often still feature sleeves that are overly long.Photograph by Pari Dukovic for The New Yorker

Frustration with the corporate fashion system led him to take a risk. In 2014, he used savings to launch his own line, Vetements ("clothes," in French). It was billed as a design collective—key members included his brother, Guram, acting as C.E.O., and the Russian stylist Lotta Volkova—but Demna was clearly the driving creative force. He could finally dissect and rejigger and twist and repair, making the kind of deconstructed clothing that he'd wanted to make at Margiela but that the establishment considered unappealing.

He had his own touchstones, of course: Communism, post-Soviet consumerism, the Orthodox Church, knockoff culture, flea markets, metal,

hip-hop, the nineties, the Internet. As a teen-ager in Tbilisi, he had found a job translating wire copy at a television news station. In 2001, when the planes hit the World Trade Center, he was conscripted, owing to his language skills, into delivering the live on-air report. “When you have insight into dirty, corrupt politics in a post-Soviet country at seventeen, you get hooked on that a bit,” he once said, explaining his habit of infusing his fashion with political and social commentary. He also wanted to imbue his clothes with attitudes that he didn’t see reflected elsewhere. He placed the shoulders on one jacket too far forward, creating a slumped, FML-ish silhouette.

Vetements was a sensation from the beginning. “Nobody seems to have consulted each other on this: They just went to shops, women and men alike; tried on the Vetements stuff; loved the way it made them look and feel; and impulsively paid up,” Sarah Mower wrote, in *Vogue*, of Demna’s firefighter pullovers and floral tea dresses, which evoked both grunge and an Eastern Bloc grandmother’s curtains. In 2015, the brand showed a collection at Le Depot, a Paris night club that bills itself as “*le plus mythique des Cruising Gay de France!* ” According to Demna, it was one of the few venues that he could afford. “But I did like that it was kind of a taboo,” he said. “I mean, fashion is probably the most gay industry—why should it be taboo for people to come to a place where, for decades, many people who have been doing fashion probably have been?” People who attended recall the show, despite overpowering bathroom aromas, as a once-in-a-lifetime fashion event. “Even taxi-drivers knew about that show,” the fashion filmmaker Loïc Prigent told me. Demna said, “Everyone came,” adding, “I found that important, somehow, especially having only always felt like I was being rejected.”

The next season, Vetements unveiled a DHL T-shirt—literally, a yellow T-shirt emblazoned with the red DHL logo. This was the latest of Demna’s diaristic touches, a Tumblr post from the still janky world of a hit brand that didn’t always know whether it would be able to pay its shipping bills. It was hailed as an immediate “capitalist kitsch” classic, especially after the company’s chairman was featured wearing it on a DHL Twitter account. Soon afterward, the *Times* declared, “A Once-Obscure Designer Is Now the Talk of Paris.”

Cristóbal Balenciaga was a poor boy, too. He was born in 1895 in the fishing village of Getaria, on Spain's Atlantic coast. He could have been a priest or a boat captain, like his father, if he hadn't become Paris's greatest couturier —"the master of us all," as Christian Dior deemed him. Balenciaga was also a refugee, who relocated to France when the Spanish Civil War made business untenable. Beaton dubbed him the "Basque Dick Whittington," mocking his humble origins, but acknowledged his peerless refinement, writing, "Balenciaga uses fabrics like a sculptor working in marble." It is necessary to quote Balenciaga's observers because he did not grant a single interview during his fifty-year career, pursuing a recondite vision of beauty with an intensity that left room for nothing else. "The sleeve was, as is well known, Balenciaga's obsession: everyone connected with the house remembers anguished cries of *la manga* and the awful sound of the master ripping one out at the last moment," his biographer Mary Blume writes in "The Master of Us All." Coco Chanel said, simply, "He is the only one among us who's a real couturier."

Balenciaga's couture clients were the aesthetes of international society: Pauline de Rothschild, who appreciated his habit of cutting a hemline high in front, to show off the legs; Rachel (Bunny) Mellon, for whom he even made gardening clothes, including a linen blouse with his customary swept-back nape. Hard as he was on himself, Balenciaga treated his clients with a certain empathy. He was known to like "a bit of belly," because making a dress for a lumpy matron was a more challenging exercise in craft. He demanded loyalty in return, believing that a truly elegant woman would frequent one dressmaker rather than flitting from house to house in search of the latest trend. His white-walled salon, at 10 Avenue George V, operated according to rigid codes of discretion. A vendeuse never said that she had "sold" something to a client; rather, she had "dressed" her, or had "made" her a dress. In the nineteen-fifties, women from the Spanish high bourgeoisie travelled to Paris twice a year to outfit themselves at Balenciaga. One observer wrote, "They came home *embalenciagadas* from head to toes, a fancy for which their husbands paid handsomely, buying and selling cotton on the black market."

Creatively, Balenciaga was a radical. He began his career as a conventional maker of pretty clothing, but by 1950 he was moving toward the purified, architectural forms for which he became revered. He transformed European

fashion by focussing on the negative space between the body and the garment, ignoring anatomical limits while the likes of Dior worshipped the waist. His designs were so abstracted that people tended to describe them using metaphors that brought the creations back down to earth—the sack dress; the tulip dress; the envelope dress; the baby-doll dress; the cocoon coat; the melon sleeve, with folds "like the skin of a plump shar-pei puppy," as Blume writes. (As ever, there were haters. In 1951, this magazine complained of "girls whose pelvis appears to start just below the chin and who look as though they had been hacked out of an old elm stump.") Balenciaga's "*chou*" wrap was made of black gazar, a stiff silk fabric that he helped to invent. It encircled the wearer's face like the leaves of a cabbage rose, or a giant scrunchie. In 1967, Balenciaga used ivory gazar for a wedding gown and swooping "coal scuttle" hat. The items, each cut on the bias from a single oval of fabric, form probably the most exquisite bridal ensemble that has ever been made.

In May of 1968, Balenciaga closed his atelier suddenly. Students were protesting in the streets; ready-to-wear was threatening the couture tradition. One Balenciaga client, the American socialite Mona von Bismarck, reportedly took to her bed for three days in Capri. The house was sold to a German pharmaceutical conglomerate and produced nothing but perfume until the nineteen-eighties, when the owners brought on respected designers, including, in the nineteen-nineties, Josephus Melchior Thimister, to try to revive the clothing business. In 1997, they promoted Nicolas Ghesquière, a twenty-five-year-old who was working on funeral outfits for the brand's licensees in Japan, to serve as the head designer. (Kering, at the time called P.P.R., bought Balenciaga in 2001.) Ghesquière restored the brand to acclaim in a fifteen-year run, updating Cristóbal Balenciaga's tradition of unusual shapes and innovative materials with such hits as a neoprene "scuba dress" with birdcage hips and knob shoulders. He was succeeded by Alexander Wang, who left in 2015, after a tepid three-year stint.

The appointment of Demna, a fashion-world insurrectionist, came as a shock. Some people loved the idea, praising Kering for hiring based on raw talent, not court politics, while others deemed the choice "risky" or "out of left field." His first ready-to-wear show, marrying Vetements slouch with Cristóbal exactingness, was a clear triumph. "It switched something immediately," Loïc Prigent said. "I saw the proportions change on all the

editors." Fashion authorities such as Pamela Golbin, a former chief curator of fashion at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, saw sympathies between the master and the maverick. Golbin said, "Balenciaga stands for a certain form of perfection, and I think Demna brought that purity and dignity back to the house."

Certain disciples of Cristóbal Balenciaga were steamed at the thought of a vulgarian in the temple. Their indignation grew as Demna made streetwear a mainstay of Balenciaga's offerings. "I have been told to be quiet, and I have turned my eyes away, but I cannot tolerate this any longer," the American couturier Ralph Rucci wrote on Instagram in 2018, complaining that the brand's leadership was "without balance, respect for proportion, without quality, without integrity just the whoreish greed to sell a gym shoe, a t-shirt, a back pack." Rucci recently posted a screenshot of a D.M. that he had sent to Demna: "I am qualified to tell you sir, that you are utterly unqualified to be the director of this house. Sneakers." *Sneakers!*

According to Charbit, the C.E.O., Demna brought up the idea of resurrecting haute couture the first time they met—and then, out of a kind of superstition, didn't mention it again until five years later. By that time, Demna had effectively earned the right to try his hand at fashion's highest form of expression, funding the painstaking labors and precious materials that couture demands via the very sneakers that his detractors claimed would bring about the house's desecration. The couture was also a business proposition, adding grown-up lustre to a brand image that skewed lowbrow and millennial. Demna presented the collection at the old salon at 10 Avenue George V, which he had restored to a faux-timeworn version of its past splendor, calling in a "patination team" to watermark the walls and to ash the carpets. He wanted it to look as though no one had touched it since Balenciaga left.

The first couture collection quelled all but Demna's most diehard skeptics. It was shown the old-school way, in silence. You could hear his ski-parka opera coats rustling through the narrow corridors. There were murmurs of appreciation for a trapezoidal satin T-shirt that Demna said took three months to make, and for a clementine-colored day suit with edges that looked like they could draw blood, shown with a slick black fruit-bowl hat.

Demna's clothes argued that you could pour just as much craft into a T-shirt as you could into a ball gown. (Charbit told me, "Demna put creativity, innovation, and effort into things that, before, people were, like, 'Uh, we need this to sell.' ") But he also respected the limits of how much T-shirt you could pour into the craft. Haute-couture shows traditionally end with a wedding gown. Demna said that he'd tried to come up with something clever. In the end, he decided to replicate the 1967 oval dress. "There was no way it could be better," he said.

Demna has never been interested in producing what, echoing Duchamp, he calls "retinal" fashion—clothing that is only pleasing to the eye. His critics say that his designs are outright ugly. Some of his supporters do, too. "Usually, there's a thing or two each season where I'm, like, 'O.K., he's gone too far. This is actually just fucking hideous,' " Eliza Douglas, the painter and model, said, laughing. "Then I'll realize a few days later, I'm, like, 'Oh, my God, *that* is the thing.' " Recently, she'd gone through this process with a pair of varnished snub-nosed clogs.

His wader boots and horn-shouldered turtlenecks are extremist takes on Francis Bacon's observation that beauty derives from strangeness in proportion. His love for off colors, iffy prints, and ersatz details recalls the provincial market stall. "He has different references, and he had the courage to use them," Sophie Fontanel, the critic, said. "He was convinced that there was something refined, chic, in what was considered kind of *plouc*." (*Plouc* means something like "hick.") What people called ugliness often amounted to tension: physically comfortable pieces that induced aesthetic unease; technically immaculate clothes with outward imperfections. "There's a dress that we really tortured," Demna once said of a gown made of delicate black lace that his team had spent three days riddling with holes. In a reversal of fashion precedent, he was practicing sadism toward the clothes rather than accepting it from them.

The goal, of course, was to get people talking. "If it doesn't cause any kind of reaction, it just doesn't exist," Demna told me one day. "That's my biggest fear, probably." According to a 2021 paper published by a scholar at the University of Lisbon, Demna is responsible for "introducing the meme into fashion." An obvious example of this is his clickbait bags: the Hefty-like calfskin garbage sack, a glazed-leather *IKEA*-style carrier, a crinkly

fifteen-hundred-dollar clutch that was made to resemble a Lay’s chip bag and came in four varieties (Classic, Limón, Salt & Vinegar, and Flamin’ Hot). The analytics firm Launchmetrics found that the Hefty-ish bag generated a “media impact value” of two million dollars in a week.

Is he for real? Throughout Demna’s career, observers have tried to figure out whether he’s a heartfelt oddball or a wily cynic. The artist and critic Hito Steyerl has likened Balenciaga’s hype machine to the Trump and Brexit campaigns, pushing products using a “dynamic of shock and subsequent normalization.” Demna is finely attuned to the attention economy. A digital native, he understands the value of creating a conversation. It doesn’t always have to be positive. This knack for getting a rise out of people made it a little hard to believe that the mood of the Gift Shop pictures wasn’t a deliberate choice, even if the aim was to grab attention rather than to cause harm.

People often worry that Demna’s jokes are on them. Douglas told me, “Over time, I’ve figured out that he’s drawn to ambiguity and walking that line and us not really knowing.” Demna has written, “The beauty of some questions is that they don’t always have an answer.” But he is unusually articulate about the thinking behind his most outré moves. He told me that he had designed the *IKEA* bag in the Duchampian tradition, inverting cultural hierarchies. It harked back to Margiela’s Franprix-bag tops of 1990. Above all, it drew on Demna’s personal history, recalling the four years of fashion school he’d spent lugging around his portfolio in just such a bag. He even made the bag in yellow, a colorway that you could get only if you stole it from an *IKEA* store. “I’ve never felt that irony was a negative,” Demna said. “Instead of getting offended, you can also laugh about it and be, like, ‘That’s fun.’ ”

He was ambivalent, though, about some of his most ubiquitous creations. Of the Triple S sneaker: “I can’t see it anymore—you’re just sick of it.” The Speed sock-shoe: “It just makes me cringe now.” In Paris one day, he took out his phone and mentioned that he has a group chat with a few superfans who give him honest feedback on his work. One was a communications student in the U.K. Others lived in the U.S., doing who knows what. They’d never met in real life, but, Demna said, “they know more about my world than probably anybody.” One of them had just sent him a message about a skintight, bubble-gum-colored minidress with a repeating Balenciaga logo.

“He was, like, ‘Did you actually do this, or did the commercial team make you?’ ”

“What did you answer?” I asked.

“I said that I did it, but, obviously, it wasn’t something that I woke up and felt like I *had* to do.”

In 2021, Demna agreed to accompany Kim Kardashian to the Met Gala, the prom of fashion. He was feeling anxious about having to walk the red carpet and then make small talk with a bunch of very famous people he had never met. The dress code was “American Independence.” Demna and Kardashian showed up in matching all-black ensembles, their faces obscured by opaque black masks. All that was missing were Grim Reaper scythes.

“I was kind of terrified,” Demna told me. “So that was my solution. Of course, there was a conceptual twist to it, given the person that I was with.” Until recently, he has insisted on being photographed in an ovoid polyurethane face shield that he developed with engineers at Mercedes-Benz. (I tried one on at the brand’s Avenue George V salon. It was surprisingly light. I felt invincible. I would wear it, supposing that I had fifty-six hundred dollars for a face shield and a completely different life.) He said that he covered his face because he had issues with his body, especially after seeing a picture of himself, taken at a conference, “with, like, a triple chin.” I pointed out that wearing a mask was likely to make people look at him more. “Yes, ultimately it does,” he admitted. “I feel that sometimes I do that—somehow subconsciously looking for that attention.” He giggled a little. “Oh, my God, it’s weird. This is something I discussed with my therapist a lot.”

“I absolutely do not believe there will be a loss,” Demna said, sitting at his usual table at Kronenhalle, a wood-panelled restaurant in Zurich with Matisses and Mirós hanging on the walls. He had ordered plant-based chicken and rösti. To drink, a tiny pitcher of lemon juice. He was fully *embalenciagado*, with silver ball hoops in his ears. I had asked him whether the advertising scandal might result in a new era of lost nerve and chastened creativity. “I’m very much back on the autoroute of dressmaking,” he said, pushing a sleeve all the way to his shoulder, revealing a tattoo of his name.

“But my dilemma right now is finding a balance between being about clothes but also not being too conservative or classic.”

It was a gray, misty Monday in February. Before lunch, we had gone for a walk. Demna had chosen as our meeting place the Fraumünster, a copper-spired church not far from the garden where he and Gomez married, in 2017. “Looks like Hogwarts, doesn’t it?” he said. The couple had spent the weekend bingeing a Netflix thriller called “Alice in Borderland.” They were packing for an impending move to the French countryside, near Geneva. Demna had just had an appointment to take care of some paperwork, and an official had asked the reason for their move. “I don’t speak Swiss German, so it was a bit awkward,” he recalled. “Well, actually, that was kind of an answer. I was, like, ‘Yeah, that’s one of the reasons: because I cannot understand what you’re saying.’ ”

As we toured Zurich’s shopping district, Demna’s cocooning hoodie and club-kid pants drew a look or two. (The feeling was mutual. “I think people are especially badly dressed in Zurich,” he told me. “I don’t know what it is. It’s really—I am quite amazed.”) The silhouette, I realized later, was classic Cristóbal, with a too-long T-shirt peeking out from a sweatshirt, adding volume like the underlayer of a baby-doll dress.

At Kronenhalle, the plates looked familiar—white porcelain, with cobalt rims and a stodgy monogram. I remembered drinking tea, the first time I met Demna, from a similar set, except that cup had read “Balenciaga Hotels & Resorts.” (There is, of course, no such thing.) The teacup had mildly irritated me at the time. Does everything need to be a gag? I’d thought. Does everything need to be a product? Now, in his oldfangled hangout, I saw it more as a wry expression of fondness.

Troll or truthteller, idealist or ironist? Demna has been all and none, playing in the uncomfortable, fertile space of the accepted paradox. Now he was declaring his “mask period” over. Memes were out, as were flashy shows and all the other “easy but exciting” distractions that had “lured” him away from the fundamentals. “I could make ten *IKEA* bags, but it’s by letting go of that comfort zone that you can grow,” he told me. “What would be the most shocking thing for my audience? I’m talking about people who know my work. Would it be another provocative thing? Or would it be actually

going back to my roots and making the coat that you never want to stop wearing?"

Was this a foregone conclusion, or yet another one of Demna's questions without answers? ♦



Sharp shoulders on a double-breasted wool coat from Winter 2020.Photograph by Pari Dukovic for The New Yorker; hair by Olivier Lebrun; makeup by Ashleigh Ciucci; prop styling by Eleonora Succi

By Evan Waite

By Kelefa Sanneh

By David Cantwell

By Susan B. Glasser

Revelations Dept.

- An Upper East Side Temple of Culture Gets a Touch-Up

An Upper East Side Temple of Culture Gets a Touch-Up

As 92NY prepares for its splashy sesquicentennial, modern-day Michelangelos restore a ninety-three-year-old ceiling mural of menorahs, lyres, and tablets.

By Sarah Larson



In 1905, at age seventeen, Vincent Maragliotti immigrated to the United States from Palermo, Sicily, to study art and architecture in Manhattan; he ended up painting not just in his new country but *on* it. In the decades that followed, Maragliotti painted murals in hotels (Waldorf-Astoria, Biltmore), in theatres (Majestic, Roxy, Shubert), in state capitols (Pennsylvania, Texas, Washington), in museums (in Harrisburg, on a William Penn theme), and, in 1930, on the ceiling of a room in the newly built home of the Young Men's Hebrew Association, later known as the 92nd Street Y. Maragliotti wasn't Jewish, and he had only five weeks to complete the job, but his menorahs, lyres, and tablets have adorned the ceiling ever since. The ceiling, recently restored after decades of wear and tear, will be unveiled this month, as part of a two-hundred-million-dollar pre-sesquicentennial renovation. "I like to think of the 92nd Street Y like New York: amazing things happening in a

terrible physical plant," Seth Pinsky, its energetic fifty-one-year-old C.E.O., said recently. (The upgrade to a "*wonderful* physical plant" includes a new name: 92NY.) One morning, in the Y's Buttenwieser Hall, as artists on beeping mechanical lifts did final touch-ups to Maragliotti's ceiling, a group inspected the results.

"The organization was founded by Jews, at a time when there were many Jews immigrating to the United States from Eastern Europe," Pinsky said, over the buzz of a power saw. The Y.M.H.A. helped acculturate Jewish immigrants, "then quickly started serving a much larger community." Buttenwieser Hall, designed for religious services, evolved into a performance space. "Martha Graham taught some of her early classes in this room," Pinsky said; the Y later became a "hotbed" of modern dance (Alvin Ailey, José Limón). Buttenwieser Hall has since hosted everything from concerts to dinners to a talk by Bill Gates, but the proscenium stage, originally designed for a rabbi, was small, so it's been removed. "We've turned it into a flexible black-box space," Pinsky said. He gestured toward a wall of chairs: a retractable seating system, ready for deployment, for use with a retractable stage. Like Transformers? "Exactly."

"It looks like rollerblade wheels," Gina Devincenzi, 92NY's archivist, said.

Maragliotti was versatile, too. "This trend of dynamic ceilings, often with wood backgrounds, was part of the whole style Zeitgeist of the time," Kim Lovejoy, an architectural historian from the restoration firm, EverGreene, said, gesturing upward at crisscrossing "faux bois" beams. The painter had done a similar ceiling for an oil baron's mansion in Oklahoma, "with Native American motifs." It was a fertile time for public art in New York: "Rockefeller Center was bursting with new decoration. The Chrysler Building, commercial lobbies, residential lobbies—a tremendously lively period of decoration of interior spaces." Lilly Tuttle, from the Museum of the City of New York, added that the era was on the cusp of the W.P.A.'s Federal Art Project.

"One of my favorites is Creation, with the rising sun over here, with the water and earth," Lovejoy said, wielding a laser pointer. "Notice that the water is very Art Deco-y." She zapped elsewhere. "The menorah, the wheat sheaves—really important in Old Testament history."

Wheat suggests “the spirit of optimism, fresh starts,” Devincenzi said. “A transformation in some capacity, like revelation, to borrow Alvin Ailey’s dance title.” She shone a flashlight. “Here’s Moses with the Ten Commandments; here’s David, kind of heralding about. This is the Exodus from Egypt.”

Pinsky said, “This was created by an Italian immigrant, for an organization that was created for Jewish immigrants. And it’s a story about leaving your home, going somewhere else with the hope of something better and more promising.”

“And then here, a date palm,” Lovejoy said. “And the lyre, of course.”

“David was alleged to have played the lyre, and the psalms were poems that he was alleged to have written and sung,” Pinsky said.

“And then Leonard Cohen famously wrote ‘Hallelujah,’ featuring it,” Devincenzi said.

The Y’s space has seen innumerable uses. During the Second World War, despite antisemitic vandalism, “it was a really interesting hub for the war effort,” Devincenzi said—blood banks, care packages for soldiers, nurse trainings. It has long had beds and athletic facilities; leaks from a locker room, directly above Buttenwieser Hall, were what had caused much of the ceiling damage.

“It’s similar to work we did in the dining hall at West Point,” Katharine George, of EverGreene, said. “Instead of Jewish imagery, it was military.”

“And less of a connection to modern dance,” Pinsky said.

Maragliotti, who lived to ninety, was no stranger to fix-ups: in the fifties, he led the restoration of the Pennsylvania state capitol’s dome, and in 1973, after the dome was damaged by leaks, he did it again. The Philadelphia *Inquirer* described Maragliotti as eighty-six, cocky, smiling, and “unperturbed by the height”: “I never give it a thought,” he said. ♦

An earlier version of this article misspelled Buttenwieser Hall.

By Emma Green

By Emily Flake

By Isaac Chotiner

By Anthony Lane

Shouts & Murmurs

- **Why I Am Such a Great Party Guest**

By [Samantha Irby]

I'm a great guest. For one, I will appreciate all your deep cleaning. The baseboards you scrubbed, the silverware you polished to a high gleam, the corners you awkwardly maneuvered the Swiffer into, to sweep the last crumbs and bits of cat hair out of sight. I, too, have stood in a room that no guest is supposed to enter and worried what someone who mistakenly stumbles in looking for the bathroom is going to think about me because there's dust on the back of the TV.

Speaking of the bathroom, I will notice that you wiped all the toothpaste flecks off the mirror and ran a wet washcloth across the scale you hide under the radiator, and I'll appreciate that your toothbrushes are in a new toothbrush holder you ran out to buy three hours before the party. I will see your Anthropologie shower curtain and think, Damn, she's fancy enough to get her shower curtains at Anthropologie? Your Aesop hand soap won't be lost on me, either.

When I squeeze past the couple having an under-their-breath fight in the kitchen, I promise to note the recently purchased fruits on the counter and register not only that you are getting your fibre but that your fibre is organic and in an earth-conscious compostable bag. And, yes, I'm clocking your tulips in an actual vase, and the loaf of crusty bakery bread you bought to trick people into thinking you prefer to bake your own sourdough. If you do, that's cool, but I bet you actually don't!

I'm so fun. I'll talk to everybody. I'll charm your mom, telling her that she looks hot in fuchsia and joking that she should adopt me. And, when your dad corners me to talk about sports, I'll win him over, because I've seen enough of Skip Bayless to fake my way through a convincing conversation about Ezekiel Elliott's rushing yards last season. Your dad will suggest that we go to a football game together, an invitation I will dodge until one of us dies.

I will try all your weird party foods and won't hide any of them in your plants. I'm gonna sample that gritty-looking breadstick even though I know that it's going to shatter into sharp dust down the front of my nice party shirt the second my teeth make contact. The too hot dip? I'm trying that. The guacamole that's gone gray? I'll have some of that, too. I will take just

enough of each proffered food item that you won't feel like you've wasted four hundred dollars on people who just want to clean out your booze cabinet.

And I will bring good shit. I have a serious lack of confidence and am always trying to prove that I have taste and like nice things. So I'm gonna go to the fancy store and ask the wine lady to recommend something in the thirty-dollar range, then I'm gonna sidle over to the cheese counter and get one of those logs of goat cheese that has blueberry goo in it and a couple of pricey boxes of sturdy-looking crackers absolutely covered in nuts and seeds.

If you invite me to your party, I will arrive early enough that you won't panic about no one showing up. My clothes will be ugly, allowing you to shine. I will be wearing some sort of shapeless Grim Reaper-style garment that will easily fade into the background of every picture. "Who is that fat ghost?" your friends will ask as they swipe through the photos you posted to prove that you know people and like to have a good time. Then they'll swipe to you in your sequinned dress and sigh in contentment, immediately forgetting about me.

And if you need someone to play tunes? I can do that! I know how to create a chill and sexy vibe, if that's what you're into, but I am also familiar with other vibes, *and* I pay for Spotify Premium. (I don't remember what credit card or e-mail address it's attached to, so I will never be free of it.) I can play fast songs for dancing or slow songs for smooching or oldies for old people, and I'm the kind of freak who will put twenty-seven hours' worth of songs on a playlist, so if your party happens to go for an entire day you won't have to listen to the same song twice.

If it's more of a passive-aggressive storytelling-competition party, I'll be great at that, too. I have so many good stories! I'm a delight to interact with, I promise. I won't say weird, off-putting, or challenging shit to casual acquaintances of yours, threatening to make your future relationships with them awkward as hell. I have a deep reservoir of jokes and funny anecdotes that'll thaw even the chilliest of the co-workers you invited just to be nice. And I know how to land a fucking punch line!

You also won't have to worry about me posting all your business online. That's right, you're never gonna log on to be confronted by the ten worst pictures of you and/or your apartment you've ever seen in your entire life, posted by me, without even the decency to apply a flattering filter. If my phone is out, it'll be because I'm trying to find a meme to show someone so I won't be that person trying to explain a visual medium, not because I am taking pictures of all your stuff which I plan to post at three in the morning.

I also can keep your cat company if you need me to? I mean, if Carli is getting stressed out in the darkened bedroom you stashed her in, I would not at all mind creeping in and petting her for many hours, until the party is over and you've forgotten I'm even there, which sounds strange in theory but will come in handy when you find out that I don't mind helping clean up! I love a party aftermath, even if it means collecting stacks of little plates covered in globs of unidentifiable gunk and half-eaten celery sticks with their little unruly celery hairs.

So, I can come, right? You're gonna text me the address and your favorite brand of tequila? I need to be invited more than anything I've ever needed in my life. Because, trust me, I really am great at a party. Especially since I won't show up. ♦

This is drawn from "Quietly Hostile."

By David Remnick

By Adlan Jackson

By Kelefa Sanneh

By Inkoo Kang

Sniff Dept.

- The Carlyle Goes Smell-o-Rama

The Carlyle Goes Smell-o-Rama

A self-taught nose, who with his wife founded D.S. & Durga, has spun perfume, candles, and profits from scents like wet pavement and, now, a hotel.

By Rachel Syme



Kavi and David Moltz, the married couple behind the fragrance house D.S. & Durga, have earned a following among hip millennials and assorted celebrities (Alia Shawkat, Mindy Kaling, Aubrey Plaza) for their experiments in olfactory simulacra. The brand specializes in perfumes and candles that mimic offbeat phenomena: "Burning Barbershop" smells like charred beard oil and Barbicide; "Concrete After Lightning" evokes wet asphalt.

Recently, the Carlyle hotel reached out to the couple, both in their early forties, with a challenge: create an array of "wet amenities" (hospitality-industry lingo for shampoo, conditioner, and body wash) inspired by the hotel's honeysuckle soap (a "dry amenity" that management has no plans to change). The Moltzes accepted. They live in a Bed-Stuy brownstone, and once a year they stash their two kids with the grandparents and splurge on a Carlyle staycation. This tradition began after their neighbor Hamilton

Leithauser (best known as the singer in the band the Walkmen) took up an annual residency at the hotel's Café Carlyle.

"On the last night of Ham's shows, we always go to his artist's suite for a party," David said, seated in a velvet wingback chair in a Carlyle suite. Tall and blond, with the short-cropped beard favored by Vikings and Skarsgårds, he was wearing a navy blazer with a gold silk pocket square and unscuffed white sneakers. "Last time I brought cigars. Like, we were *crushing* cigars in there. And the wives were, like, 'Dude, what the fuck? Those stink!' "

Kavi didn't think the Carlyle minded. She is petite, of Indian descent, with long black hair, claret lipstick, and patent-leather platform loafers. "Like, they can't say it's *O.K.*, but it's, like, they want stuff to be happening within these walls."

Seated on a windowsill, she was buzzing about a star sighting in the lobby. "I saw Bill fucking Murray downstairs," she said, kicking her feet back and forth like a girl on a swing. She was wearing a baggy vintage Dior blazer in a shade she called "Carlyle yellow."

"It's not quite Carlyle yellow," David said, noting that the hotel's upholstery was closer to dandelion.

Kavi rolled her eyes: "Whatever."

The Moltzes met in 2007, outside a bar on the Lower East Side. David was working as a waiter at a vegan restaurant. Kavi was a junior employee at an architecture firm. Shortly into their relationship, David started noodling around with tinctures and oils to create his own fragrances. (He is a self-taught "nose.") Kavi designed the bottles and logo. ("D.S." comes from David's first two initials; "Durga," a Hindu goddess, was David's pet name for his wife.) In 2008, they launched their business, and two years later they married. "We had no idea what we were doing," Kavi said. "We thought it was an art project." The perfume gained a cult following (David Beckham is said to wear "Cowboy Grass"), and the business moved to a large space in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The brand now has stores in Williamsburg and SoHo, and will open a Los Angeles location in May.

When the Carlyle asked for a wet-amenities scent, the Moltzes upped the ante. They would make the honeysuckle-y liquids in teeny tubes for the in-room toilette, they said, and also wanted to launch a Carlyle perfume to be sold in the lobby, on their Web site, and at Bergdorf Goodman. (The scent launches this week.) David set to work. His first inspiration was linden blossoms. “I always make these studies of flowers, walking around New York,” he said. “Then there *had* to be citrus.” He spritzed a paper strip with the perfume and waved it in the air. “Then I really wanted to smell that kind of Old World, international sophistication, so you have that sandalwood-y, rose-y thing going on. The description is like a who’s who of perfume materials, so you take the most famous ingredients and put them together, like people hanging out downstairs at the bar. It’s a very uptown scent.”

The couple decided that it was time for a cocktail and headed down to the hotel’s Bemelmans Bar, lately clogged with Gen Z-ers, thanks to TikTok. Once seated at a table by the piano, they ordered a bottle of champagne and asked the waiter to bring a tray of the bar’s special cheese crackers. “I’d buy them in bulk if I could,” Kavi said, then whispered, “Don’t you think they probably come from Costco?”

They ruminated on the power of fragrance. “When I was six years old, I won a bottle of Pierre Cardin in a camp raffle,” David said. “And I fell in love with fragrances right then and there.”

Kavi said, “When we met, I was wearing Comme des Garçons Odeur 71. They don’t make it anymore.”

David closed his eyes and inhaled: “It smelled like hot light bulbs.” ♦

By Mai B. Nguyen

By Naaman Zhou

By Shauna Lyon

By Rachel Syme

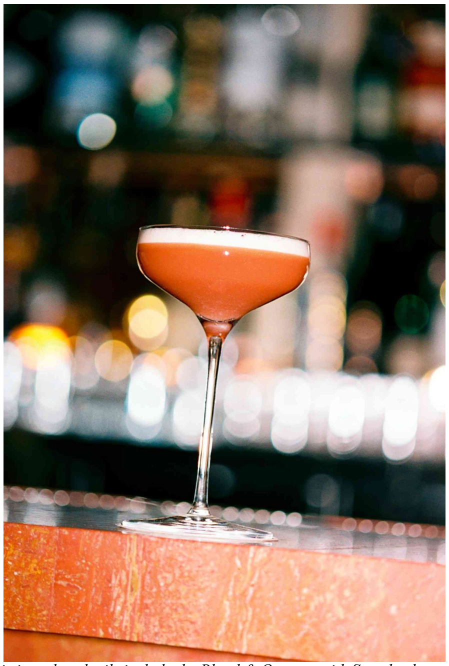
Tables for Two

- **The Intimate Approach of Jupiter, at Rockefeller Center**

By Shauna Lyon

A heartening experiment is under way at Rockefeller Center, where new restaurants are sprouting up from thoughtful local chefs at the top of their game. A stroll through the labyrinthine subterranean concourse reveals, alongside the predictable Sweetgreen and Starbucks, grab-and-go branches of such New York City gems as the nirvana of Italian sandwiches Alidoro, which originated in SoHo more than thirty years ago, and J. J. Johnson's Harlem-based rice-bowl enterprise, Fieldtrip. Anchoring these are a set of sophisticated new restaurants, including the elegant all-day Italian café Lodi, from Ignacio Mattos; the Art Deco palace Le Rock, from the chefs behind Frenchette; the brainy Korean tasting-menu den Naro, from the owners of Atomix and Atoboy; and Five Acres, from the chef Greg Baxtrom, of the beloved Prospect Heights spot Olmsted. Among this company, Jupiter, a casually refined Italian restaurant on the concourse level, cuts a stylish figure.

Jupiter, from the British chefs Jess Shadbolt and Clare de Boer (who met working at the River Café in London) and the American Annie Shi—their first place was the SoHo jewel box King, which they opened in 2016—is named for the supreme Roman god. Befitting a move uptown, Jupiter is twice the size of King, but the space retains a warm feel, with one set of tables off a handsome red-travertine bar and another across from the open kitchen, with a prime view of the skating rink and its showpiece, the eighteen-foot gilt-bronze statue of Prometheus, mid-handoff of the eternal flame.

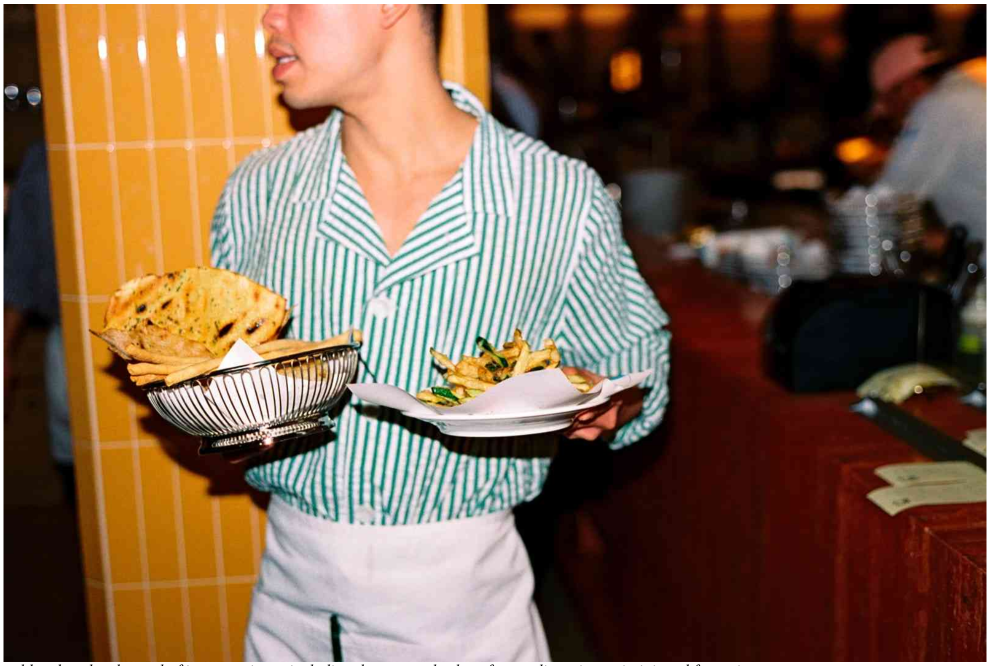

Sophisticated cocktails include the Blood & Orange, with Scotch, cherry, orange, vermouth, and egg white.



Jupiter is twice the size of King, but it retains a warm feel.

In 2020, when they were tapped by Tishman Speyer, the real-estate company responsible for corralling all this culinary talent, Shadbolt, de Boer, and Shi knew that they wanted to do pasta and wine; they focussed on bridging the gap between their intimate approach and the massive hustle of their new location. “We wanted to create something that lent itself to that buzzy, energized place that is the Rockefeller Center—it’s super iconic,” Shadbolt told me. They wanted to “echo the Italian piazza in its accents. It’s a real

thoroughfare, midtown. An Italian, genteel, all-day eatery is really what wowed us."



You could make a lovely meal of just appetizers, including the pane, a basket of carta di musica, grissini, and focaccia.

Sophisticated cocktails befitting Piazza Navona lean bitter and beautiful, following the current vogue of sourcing obscure ingredients (olive leaf, smoked rhubarb) and amari. You could make a lovely meal of just appetizers, including the grand *pane*, a basket of *carta di musica* and focaccia; *carciofi alla giudia*, flowery clusters of fried artichoke with lemon for spritzing; and *insalata di stagione*, a winter salad of radicchio di Treviso, wine-braised pear, and hazelnuts, rounded out by salty Ubriaco cheese. But do not miss the deconstructed crab toast—a plate of grilled *pagnotta* bread, a pile of sweet crab, a dollop of aioli, and a dressed fennel salad—or the beef *sott'olio*, for which a seared filet is sliced thin and marinated in olive oil, resulting in luscious, silky sheets of beef, showered with fresh horseradish and flaky salt.

Be warned: butter and olive oil are deployed copiously. Butter sauce blankets rabbit *agnoli* and spinach-and-ricotta tortellini. A fascinating Tuscan dish of buttered noodles topped with seared chicken livers doubles down on decadent austerity; whole dorade, roasted to perfection, is finished with melted anchovies and fragrant olive oil.

Perhaps it’s inevitable that Jupiter would feel not quite as special as King—extensive branding, with a recurring curlicue motif (mirroring skaters’ paths?), seems heavily conceptual. A Jupiter “pasta water” candle, burning in the unisex bathroom, is also for sale.

But rinkside on a Thursday afternoon, nursing a nutmeg-dusted bowl of veal-and-chicken *brodo*, a diner cannot deny the feeling of cozy respite. Jupiter serves lunch and dinner on weekdays; mid-April, they plan to open on Saturdays, too. “We’re very much looking forward to spring,” Shadbolt said. “We’re looking at a *risi e bisi*, a classic Venetian pea-and-mint risotto, so that’s on the docket for when the peas arrive.” And, after ice-skating season, the rink becomes Flipper’s, a roller disco. *(Dishes $12-$63.)* ♦

By Tom Chitty

By Lauren Michele Jackson

By Lily Meyer

By Ishmael Reed

The Current Cinema

- The Thief as Artist in “Inside”

By Anthony Lane

The hero of "Inside," a new film directed by Vasilis Katsoupis, is apparently called Nemo, though I never caught the name. All I know is that he's a thief, and that he's played by Willem Dafoe. As the story commences, a helicopter deposits Nemo onto the roof of a tall building in New York. From the fact that the chopper is heard but not seen, you will gather that "Inside" is not blessed with an inexhaustible budget. Here is an art-house flick, cunningly coated in the gleam of a high-tech thriller.

And what an art house. Nemo breaks into a top-floor apartment, which looks more like a gallery than a home. It belongs to a man of evident wealth and slightly uncertain taste, who is away in Kazakhstan. Hanging on the walls—or, in the case of video installations, projected onto screens—are multiple works of modern art, mostly of recent vintage. The oldest are by Egon Schiele, and it is these that Nemo has come to steal, presumably so that they can be passed on to another Croesus. Swift and feline, Nemo gathers all but one of the Schieles and prepares to depart, whereupon the security system locks the doors and shuts him in. He must spend the rest of the film alone, aloft, unmissed, and unlamented. Think Rapunzel without the hair.

It's not hard to spot the wily ways in which Katsoupis and his screenwriter, Ben Hopkins, rig the plot. The gas and the water have been switched off in the apartment, meaning that Nemo can't cook any food or flush the toilet. The electricity, on the other hand, remains on, so he is able to admire a glowing blue neon sign—another piece of art—that reads "all the time that will come after this moment." The fridge, too, is in use: there's an amazing shot of Nemo, parched and desperate, inserting his head into the icebox and licking the chilly moisture from the sides. Oh, and the phone that connects him to the lobby of the building is out of order. Of course it is.

All of which suggests that "Inside" belongs with "Castaway" (2000), "The Martian" (2015), and other tales of solitary survival. Although Nemo is in the lap of luxury, snacking on truffle sauce and caviar from the fridge, the apartment is as imprisoning as Mars, and, being a resourceful fellow, he is determined to abscond. The only possible exit is a skylight, and the only means of reaching it is to build a tower from a bedstead and other bits of furniture. Standing atop his structure and chipping away at plaster, he needs something to protect his eyes, so he smashes a purple glass vase, picks out

two curved shards, and binds them together with fabric. Voilà: a pair of makeshift goggles. The look is part handyman, part demon. Very cool, and very Dafoe.

What distinguishes Nemo from earlier Crusoes is that he's not just an escape artist but an actual artist. In voice-over, he tells us that, as a child, he valued his sketchbooks above all else; now, in his compulsory lockdown, he begins to draw. Graphite sprinkles onto the floor, so he scoops it up, swishes it around his mouth, and spits on the wall, making a black splash—oral Action painting, you might say. Also, as if his tower had not sated his yen for construction, he conjures a sculpture of found materials: a form of altar, crowned with soft cushions and metal nuts. But who is worshipping whom? What's going on?

Well, the movie is morphing. Much of it, in the first half, is funny, deft, and dotted with suspense. If the door of the fridge is left open, for example, the Macarena starts to play. (Nemo, initially vexed by this, gives in and dances along.) A young woman (Eliza Stuyck) employed as a cleaner in the building is oblivious of Nemo's presence, yet he can observe her on CCTV. He names her Jasmine, and, at one lovely point, he watches her enjoying a quick cigarette and vacuuming the smoke from the air. Gradually, however, "Inside" grows heavy. The tread of the story slows; dream sequences intrude, to no effect; Nemo turns inward, courting madness; and we realize that Katsoupis is positioning his film as an exercise in performance art, to match the video installations and the other works. Notice the photograph of a man attached to a wall with duct tape. That is an untitled image by the waggish Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan, from 1999, and the poor guy being displayed, with a heretical hint of crucifixion, is a gallery owner from Milan—a kindred spirit for Nemo, who is equally stuck.

To a degree, this creative scheme makes sense. It certainly tallies with the singular career of Dafoe, whom we saw as the thieving Caravaggio, an Allied agent with missing thumbs, in "The English Patient" (1996); as van Gogh, in "At Eternity's Gate" (2018); and, long ago, in "To Live and Die in L.A." (1985), as a snaky villain and artist who sets fire to one of his own paintings, the better to concentrate on his skills as a master forger. The face is more graven these days, but the gnashing grin and the wry tone of his delivery are unchanged, as is Dafoe's knack for wrong-footing us; his

wicked characters are as hard to dislike as his virtuous ones are to trust. We instinctively believe in him as a maker of things, and "Inside" would have been implausible, or unbearable, with any other actor in the role. Life, in the hands of Dafoe, is an agonized game.

For Katsoupis, regrettably, agony wins the day. To furnish a movie with cultural props, however lavish, is not to confer an automatic gravity and heft; witness Nemo inching into a hidden passageway and discovering not just a Schiele self-portrait, from 1910, but an original copy of "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," by William Blake, which Nemo then studies and recites. (The Blake is quite a coup, since only nine copies are known to exist.) Do the shenanigans of "Inside" keep honest company with such treasures? Should we bracket Dafoe, compellingly wiry as he is, with the acutely angled stiffness of the Schiele picture—the "enigmatic substances I am made of," as the artist wrote in 1911? Not really. Give me the sharp wit of the movie's early scenes, which are far more disrespectful: the enigma-free sight of Nemo, for instance, trying to crunch through a door and deploying "Paper Hat," a bronze sculpture by Lynn Chadwick, as a *crowbar*. Who said art is no use?

Two ways to win the Cold War. Option one: a first strike, annihilating the Communist bloc's arsenal of nuclear weapons before they can be launched in retaliation. Option two, no less fraught with risk: send nine white guys, including four horn players and a singer with a penchant for leather pants, to perform Grammy-winning rock and roll behind the Iron Curtain. It is this second course of action that was pursued in 1970, and that is investigated in a knotty new documentary, "What the Hell Happened to Blood, Sweat & Tears?"

Nobody would have asked that question in 1969, when "Blood, Sweat & Tears," the second album by the group of the same name, was enthroned for weeks at the top of the charts. It's a witches' brew, kicking off with a riff on Erik Satie and marked by salvos of brass and mid-song shifts in tempo, but the director of the documentary, John Scheinfeld, doesn't dive very deep into the music. Although he has made films about John Coltrane, John Lennon, and Harry Nilsson, what grips him here, understandably, is the particular summer when Blood, Sweat & Tears went on tour to Yugoslavia, Romania, and Poland. It was a revelation, and a fall from grace.

Why did they go? Blackmail, of a sort. The lead vocalist, a Canadian named David Clayton-Thomas, had a voice of tremendous rasp and rumble. He sounded like a volcano making conversation. He was also in danger of losing his green card, and, to avoid that fate, the band's manager struck a dark deal with the U.S. State Department, which wanted American performers who could spread the word, or the groove, behind enemy lines. So the band was dispatched to hot spots such as Zagreb (where the audience was sullenly unresponsive) and Warsaw (the opposite). Scariest of all was Bucharest, where the concert was officially deemed "too successful," where cops with German shepherds were on hand to quash the crowd's delight, where one enthusiast was taken away and beaten for requesting an autograph, and where "people don't enjoy the privilege of spontaneous outburst," as Clayton-Thomas reported, back in L.A. He added, "It's given us all a new appreciation of various freedoms that we took for granted."

That was true, but it was an unforgivable truth—anathema to those in the counterculture for whom America held a monopoly on repression. Blood, Sweat & Tears were reviled in the press as a "fascist rock band" in the making, and as "pig-collaborators" by Abbie Hoffman, who never had the pleasure of protesting in Bucharest. More than it knows, this movie is an engaging, and sometimes enraging, exposé of chronic insularity. (I suggest viewing it as an ironic footnote, or a bonus track, to "The Free World," a consummate study of the period by my colleague Louis Menand.) One of the group's biggest hits, "And When I Die," contains the line "All I ask of living is to have no chains on me." Look closely at the footage of the Romanian fans, at a gig, and you will see a pair of hands raised high in celebration. They are joined together by a chain. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

The Theatre

- History Repeats Itself in the Broadway Revival of “Parade”

History Repeats Itself in the Broadway Revival of “Parade”

Ben Platt stars as the doomed Leo Frank in Alfred Uhry and Jason Robert Brown’s all too relevant musical tragedy.

By Helen Shaw



How well do modern theatregoers seeing “Parade,” at the Bernard B. Jacobs, know the story of Leo Frank? It’s been more than a century since Frank, the Jewish superintendent of an Atlanta pencil factory, was accused of the sexual assault and murder of thirteen-year-old Mary Phagan, railroaded into a guilty verdict, tantalized with the possibility of an appeal, then kidnapped from prison and lynched in Marietta, Georgia. At the time, the overt display of Southern antisemitism—crowds outside the courthouse where he was tried screamed “Hang the Jew!”—shocked the country. Some rose up against it: Frank’s ordeal spurred the formation of the Anti-Defamation League, for example. But it also helped fuel the revival of the Ku Klux Klan. Some of the men who burned a cross on Stone Mountain in 1915 were the so-called Knights of Mary Phagan, who had been in Marietta only a few months earlier, under an oak tree.

Leo Frank, though, is no longer a universally familiar name. The director Michael Arden's Broadway revival of the 1998 musical, with music and lyrics by Jason Robert Brown and a book by Alfred Uhry, could have used that ignorance to create suspense; some audience members may expect something celebratory—it's called "Parade"! But this production, which stars Ben Platt and had a short run last fall at New York City Center, deliberately denies itself the power of surprise. Before the show, footage of modern-day Marietta, in which we see the roadside historical marker of the lynching, fills the stage's back wall. Arden (nominated for a Tony for his Deaf West production of "Spring Awakening" and for his revival of "Once on This Island") and the projection designer, Sven Ortel, zoom in close to the sign's text, which outlines the sequence of events. The projection then highlights one line: "Without addressing guilt or innocence, and in recognition of the state's failure to either protect Frank or bring his killers to justice, he was granted a posthumous pardon in 1986."

Foregrounding that sentence is one of the discomfiting choices in a sometimes contradictory, often impressive show. In a 2021 talk to an online class, Uhry spoke of having a frisson of doubt about Frank's innocence, which is widely accepted. "We *almost* know he didn't do it," he said. Uhry, whose grandmother played cards with Frank's widow, says he's ninety-nine per cent sure that the real killer was the factory's sweeper, Jim Conley (Alex Joseph Grayson); Arden's production seems to wonder if that's the right proportion. For one thing, there's that phrase "without addressing guilt or innocence." For another, when Mary (Erin Rose Doyle), a worker at the factory, goes to Frank's office to collect her pay, she holds the string of a white balloon—a symbol of purity. As she speaks to Leo, she lets the balloon go, and it vanishes into the theatre's fly space. It's one of Arden's ickiest touches, and it's not in the original script.

But, then, every part of this "Parade" pulls against itself. The plot is part invented slow-burn love story—Frank, a Northerner, clearly hates Atlanta, and at first his marriage to Lucille (Micaela Diamond) seems sterile and confused—and part true-crime investigation, complete with gotcha moments for lying witnesses. In a clever patchwork, we revisit some moments as they shift from memory to evidence: little Mary's meeting with Leo, and various testimonies. I admire that "Parade" doesn't use a song-as-soliloquy to let us fully understand Frank; after the crime is discovered, we never glimpse into

his mind when he's alone. (What happens must horrify us whether we like him or not.) Instead, Uhry keeps diverting our attention to the community: the Black Atlantans (Courtnee Carter and Douglas Lyons) who note that outraged Northerners care only because Mary and Leo are white (they open the second act with the blistering song "A Rumblin' and a Rollin' "); the boy who once teased Mary on a streetcar (Jake Pedersen, his voice bugle-bright); the sympathetic governor (Sean Allan Krill) who commutes Frank's death sentence to life imprisonment; the wicked prosecutor (Paul Alexander Nolan) who suborns perjury.

Brown's spectacular score is also a crazy quilt, a tour of Americana forms, from barrelhouse rags to Charles Ives-influenced symphonic grandeur. It creates its most chilling effects through musical collision. For instance, the erotic, bluesy song that Conley performs with a chain gang is actually a quasi-confession, simultaneously gorgeous and appalling, particularly as sung by the astonishing Grayson. And the musical kicks off with near-cacophony. First, there's a flashback to a young Confederate soldier (Charlie Webb) singing about his love for Georgia—"I go to fight for these old hills behind me / these old red hills of home." Then it's fifty years later, and he's an old veteran, swept up in a group of white revellers who sing their own rousing Southern anthem at a Confederate Memorial Day parade. As they shout, Frank, trying to push through the crowd, sings a plaintive ballad of not-belonging. The more patriotic and hectic the Georgians get, the more disturbing it is. But that doesn't stop the audience from roaring its approval. Harold Prince, the show's original director and its co-conceiver, did something similar in 1966 with "Tomorrow Belongs to Me," in "Cabaret," using a song to step the short distance from nationalism to fascism. "Parade" gets us to applaud people waving Confederate flags. Who's the mob? *Who's* easily led?

Platt, the first and dearest Evan Hansen, has a talent for self-redaction, and here, as the shy Frank, he hunches his shoulders, trying to disappear. Leo finds a belated passion with his wife, and Platt and Diamond, whose voices are exquisitely clear and beautifully complementary, sing the hell out of their Act II duets. There's some queasiness, though, in seeing their conjugal awakening while our minds are occupied by Mary's violation. Arden's attention has been caught by these unsavory juxtapositions, too: he uses a picnic-blanket prop to visually connect the Franks, who spread it out for a

tryst on a prison-cell floor, to the early-appearing Confederate soldier and his sweetheart, who tumble on that same blanket like lovers on the grass. Georgia earth and the sexual yielding of Southern white women are thus linked in the play's imagination—as are the battles (and atrocities) perpetrated in their names.

Yet, for all this thought-provoking complexity, some crucial part of this "Parade" passed me by. It's not that it isn't relevant: in February, neo-Nazis protested one of the preview performances, suggesting that anti-Frank propaganda continues to be part of the white-supremacist playbook. But the production's moral landscape still shifts underfoot. What do we owe Mary, beyond that white balloon, and should the very real tragedy experienced by her and the Franks be eclipsed by an invented love story? These questions preoccupied me, but, oddly, they didn't move me. Perhaps my emotions got lost in those scenes with Lucille, which are marred by Diamond's uneasy grasp on a Southern accent. Or perhaps they bumped into Dane Laffrey's crowded set, a whole antique store's worth of furniture, with an elevated platform in the center, where most of the action takes place. This arrangement makes the trial scenes difficult to parse, and it physically obstructs what should be the most frightening sequence: Frank's abduction by that other parade, the rushing crowd of blood-crazed Knights.

There was, though, one wrenching moment that smashed through my sense of remove. As Leo Frank is standing at the brink, a noose around his neck, he sings the Sh'ma, the prayer meant to be the last words uttered by the dying. Brown sets it to the same melody as "The Old Red Hills of Home," a musical sequence that seems designed for Platt's magnificently restrained voice—he touches each note as delicately as a robin's egg. It's difficult to work out what this strange, serious show means by making the Hebrew prayer sound like the song that sent that Confederate boy off to war. Is Leo experiencing kinship? Defiance? Some shows heal; others are meant to keep a wound open. The scene uncovers an unspeakable mystery beneath the historical facts, conjuring something new out of intertwining, even competing, evocations of faith. There are beliefs that we know are diametrically and morally opposed. Yet in America, with her blood-red hills, the sacred and the dangerously nostalgic can be sung to the same tune. ♦

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